

ARTICULATION AND THE AGORAPHOBIC EXPERIENCE
IN THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

By

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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Finding a language in which to utter oneself is the preoccupation of Emily Dickinson, probably the nineteenth century's most famous agoraphobic. At the center of Dickinson's agoraphobic world is the panic episode which includes the spontaneous feeling of change in both the inner world and the outer world: depersonalization and derealization. Although overwhelming, involving strong and even hyperbolic cognitive responses, the panic evades articulation. The agoraphobic ambiguously complains of strange, uncertain perceptions and unstable environments. Unable to identify the experience, the agoraphobic fears a break with reality and a complete loss of control: madness. Most distressing, however, is the profound desire to share the experience without the ability to execute articulation.

The extraordinary circumstance of agoraphobia is reflected in Dickinson's use of language and metaphor. Metaphor seems to allow Dickinson the control only vaguely realized in her real life. This need for control is specifically addressed in Dickinson's language of geometry, par-

ticularly the poems that use the home or house image or metaphor. Dickinson often attempts with such metaphors to reduce the environment to exact, dependable, but often abstract formulas or traces. This reduction suggests the agoraphobic need for a predictable, even formulated, environment.

The selection and use of words in a specific group of Dickinson's poems suggest the agoraphobic need for freedom as well as control. Two kinds of diction, or treatments of dictions, distinguish the two needs. The styles are informed by the sometimes incompatible orientations of the agoraphobic lifestyle. Each of the two viewpoints, one obsessed with control and one with freedom, uses a dominant motif. The death metaphor responds to the need for control, and the subjective, or "madness," metaphor responds to the need for freedom.

Ultimately, Dickinson acknowledges that the extreme subjectivity of the agoraphobic condition, particularly the panic episode, resists objective meaning. Articulation breaks down; Dickinson concentrates upon conveyance of the limitations of language to deal with certain profound but personal experiences. Rather than "correct" the unreal reality of her phobic experience, rather than make it fit within a rational system of expression, Dickinson attempts to represent the sense of detachment that results when language interferes with the chaos of the phobic experience.

"A THING SO TERRIBLE":
THE INEXPLICABLE MOMENT
IN EMILY DICKINSON'S METAPHOR

A doctor who practiced medicine in Boston in the late nineteenth century encouraged one of her many patients with neurasthenic disorders to be "frank---utter yourself in confidence and trust, so we shall be one in exploring your case." The perplexed woman is reported to have said: "Doctor, I know no language in which to utter myself."¹

The problem of articulation, of finding the "language in which to utter [oneself]," is crucial to the neurasthenic, especially the agoraphobic, experience. At the center of the agoraphobic world is the panic episode which includes the sudden, seemingly spontaneous feeling or change in both the inner world and the outer world (depersonalization and derealization). Involving strong and even hyperbolic cognitive responses, the panic is, nonetheless, only vaguely expressible. The subjective changes are difficult to describe:

The feeling is like no other. There is a readiness to get away, but the object of that feeling is often not apparent. It is as though something dreadful is about to happen, like sitting on a volcano. Although popularly described as the "flight or fight" reaction, anxiety in the agoraphobic sense is more than that. The physiological components are similar but the inner tensions are much greater because the "out of the blue" panic attacks have no obvious cause.²

Unable to identify this ambiguous experience, the agoraphobic often will complain of uncertain, strange, or surreal perceptions. The sufferer fears a break with reality and a complete loss of control

which he may label as madness. The fear results in the obsessive avoidance of or flight from any situation considered by the agoraphobic to be panic-provoking. Most distressing for the sufferer, however, is the profound desire to share the experience without the ability to effect articulation. Even though the phobic individual knows the panic intimately, it remains verbally inaccessible. Although our Boston practitioner assumes an availability of language, her patient's response suggests an experience that is resistant to language. The woman cannot find words with which to discuss her situation.

Finding a language in which to utter oneself is a preoccupation of the poet Emily Dickinson, probably the nineteenth century's most famous agoraphobic. Dickinson's agoraphobia is evidenced in a letter she wrote to her friend Susan Gilbert; in it she attempts to describe what is, almost certainly, a panic episode:

I'm just from meeting, Susie, and as I sorely feared, my life was made a "victim." I walked--I ran--I turned precarious corners--One moment I was not--then soared aloft like a Phoenix, soon as the foe was by--and then anticipating an enemy again, my soiled and drooping plumage might have been seen emerging from just behind a fence, vainly endeavoring to fly once more from hence.... I smiled to think of me and my geometry, during the journey there--It would have puzzled Euclid, and it's doubtful result, have solemnized a Day.

[And] there I sat, and sighed, and wondered [why] I was scared so, for surely in the whole world was nothing I need to fear--Yet there the Phantom was, and though I kept resolving to be as brave as Turks, and bold as Polar Bears, it didn't help me any. After the opening prayer, I ventured to turn around. Mr Carter immediately looked at me--Mr Sweetser attempted to do so, but I discovered nothing, up in the sky somewhere, and gazed intently at it, for quite a half an hour. During the exercises I became more calm, and was able to get out of church quite comfortably. Several soared around me, and, sought to devour me, but I felt an easy prey to Miss Lovina Dickinson, being too exhausted to make any further resistance then. She entertained me with much sprightly remark, until at last our gate

was reached, and I need'nt tell you Susie, just how I clutched the latch, and whirled the merry key, and fairly danced for joy, to find myself at home!³

A century after Dickinson's experience, a diagnosed agoraphobic attempts to give her description of a similar panic attack:

I was inside a very big shopping precinct and all of a sudden, it happened: in a matter of seconds, I was like a mad woman. It was like a nightmare, only I was awake.... I felt as if I were going to collapse; it was as if I had no control over my limbs; I felt as though it were impossible to move. It was as if I had been taken over by some stronger force. I saw all the people looking at me--just faces, no bodies, all merged into one. I could hear the voices of the people but from a long way off. I could not think of anything except the way I was feeling and that I had to get out and run quickly or I would die. Outside it subsided a little. It leaves you with a hopeless feeling because you know it will happen again and again. I was absolutely drained when I got home....⁴

If differences in time and place are disregarded, the accounts of the two subjects show several similarities: anticipatory anxiety; physical exhaustion; an exaggerated sensitivity to people; a feeling of being watched (observed); and a sense of entrapment, victimization, or hopelessness. Both women seem to be experiencing essentially similar episodes.

More significant, however, are the differences of narration in which the episodes are couched. Using allusions, hyperboles, and metaphors, Dickinson's account is the more figurative of the two. As the poet reports it, her experience is nearly epic: she sees herself as the Phoenix-like victim of a pursuing Phantom. The Phoenix image implies a recurrence of the episode; our second agoraphobic tells us simply "it will happen again and again." The second woman feels "all the people [are] looking" at her and their faces merge into one face; Dickinson's crowd "roars" and threatens to "devour." The poet's difficult walk involves

her as the Phoenix soaring and then hiding from its enemy; our modern subject feels she has lost control of her legs and cannot easily move away from her problem. Dickinson's "Phantom," I believe, impresses us as a more accessible foe than "some stronger force." She ascribes to her experience adversarial characteristics which animate, if not personify, the oppressive feeling. The comparison of the two accounts is not given as proof of Dickinson's agoraphobia: if agoraphobic behavior (extreme anxiety, panic, withdrawal) defines one as an agoraphobic, then Dickinson must be identified as such. Whatever else the facts of her life prove or disprove, they strongly suggest a phobic personality.

I would rather hope that the comparison of the two accounts might demonstrate something of Emily Dickinson's genius: in her metaphors, the inexpressible moment is given an utterance. Although both experiences remain ambiguous (in its own way, "Phantom" is probably no less illusory than "some stronger force"), Dickinson's metaphor does involve containment and location of the experience within a kind of body. An immaterial semblance of what remains abstract, incorporeal, or even unreal, "Phantom" provides the perfect representation for the ambiguous situation. "Force," on the other hand, remains nearly abstract; it has no representational body that might carry it or express it (or allow it to be avoided or escaped from).

Additionally, the comparison might suggest different points of view. Dickinson's Phoenix, her metaphoric self, soars in and out (and above) the situation. Escape and avoidance are associated with flight: "soon as the foe was by," she "soared aloft like Phoenix." Unlike the second woman, Dickinson creates for herself an imaginative

perspective above the experience. The position perhaps allows control that can be realized only metaphorically. Because Dickinson's problem is contained, nearly personified in the "Phantom" and "foe," control seems possible, imaginable. In metaphor the relationship between the experience and the experiencer is manageable, even alterable: the episode no longer need overwhelm and surround. The poet need not remain at the center of the experience as if she had "been taken over by some stronger force." Both despair and hope are manifested in the Phoenix image. The women share a terror, but the poet seems also satisfied that she can rebound from each setback. Despite the circuitous geometry of her route, which she amusingly insists "would have puzzled Euclid," Dickinson continues. She heroically defies the limitations which the "Phantom's" appearance imposes upon her environment.

Language, too, has certain limitations which Dickinson's poems curiously and often inexplicably transcend. Although treated with familiarity, her metaphors, as we shall see, are difficult to comprehend. Many of her poems simply refuse to relax a basic insistence upon abstruseness. So much a part of the Dickinson style, the ambiguous metaphor reflects, I believe, strategies closely related to the poet's agoraphobia.

David Porter is one of the few readers who have considered the connection between style and withdrawal in Dickinson's work. In Dickinson: The Modern Idiom, Porter speaks of the idiosyncratic style that results from the lack of an "informing design" in many of the poems:

[Dickinson] withdrew in all the physical ways with which we are familiar, and we must at long last consider what the effect was on her poems.... The lack of architecture is a consequence of a linguistic reflexiveness, and both are part of the harsh artistic freedom that opens up when reality and language undergo a separation.

[Her language] detached itself from the authority of experience and [became], in its cramped form and selectional daring, self-regarding and hyperbolic.⁵

Unlike Porter, I associate the separation of Dickinson's language from the "authority of experience" specifically with an agoraphobic management of conflict. Her withdrawal and her style, I believe, do not have a causal relationship, though both are influenced, perhaps even determined, by the poet's agoraphobic demands. The Dickinson metaphor suggests concealment of ideas and experiences, of conflicts, that cannot be faced directly. Identification of "things so terrible" is avoided repeatedly in much of her work.

As in many of the poems, the occasion of "The first Day's Night had Come" (J. 410)⁶ remains ambiguous:

The first Day's Night had come--
And grateful that a thing
So terrible--had been endured--
I told my Soul to sing--

She said her Strings were snapt--
Her Bow--to Atoms blown--
And so to mend her--gave me work
Until another Morn--

And then--a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled it's horror in my face--
Until it blocked my eyes--

My Brain--begun to laugh--
I mumbled--like a fool--
And tho' 'tis Years ago--that Day--
My Brain keeps giggling--still.

And Somethings' odd--within--
That person that I was--
And this One--do not feel the same--
Could it be Madness--this?

Indifferent to the identity of the horror and yet expressive of its essence, the metaphor of the poem provides a kind of masking. We learn,

however, about the intensity, the explosiveness, of the experience: it has damaged the soul, snapped its sensitive strings, and blown its bow to atoms. Instead of lingering over the experience, the narrator, who has survived despite the damage, seems more concerned with regaining control and avoiding the probable recurrence of the episode. In the metaphor of the poem, the narrator cleverly evades direct confrontation. Continuously she connects the horror to the light and to seeing. Avoidance (escape) is, therefore, accomplished in predictable darkness or blindness. Even as the poem begins, night already has provided a grateful refuge from the unidentified horror. Again in the second and third stanzas, morning ushers in a day that carries the experience. The "thing so terrible" then unfurls itself in the narrator's face until it blocks her view.

As it happens, the horror will move no further into the poem than this, no closer to the narrator. The poem continues in the present tense: "And tho' 'tis Years ago--that Day..." In metaphor the experience has been stopped and controlled but neither identified nor seen. Ironically, the horror itself has been infused with the darkness (the inevitable blocking of sight) into which the narrator can escape. In her life, as we shall see, Dickinson often gains a kind of control by refusing to face experience directly. In her poems and metaphors, fears which cannot be confronted often become these unimaginable, these blinding horrors.

Dickinson discovered in metaphor an utterance that would seem completely compatible with her phobic demands. Indeed, agoraphobia might be regarded as the equivalent of an "informing design" otherwise, according to Porter, missing from her work. Scholarship that would consider agoraphobia an interesting but purely biographical footnote

to Dickinson's work fails to understand the pervasive influence of the disorder in the life of its victim. We know that Dickinson's obsessive need for privacy restricted her socially; the obsession dominated her intellectual and creative activities as well. She seems to have focused her energies into those areas of her life over which she felt most confident of control: her home and family, a selected society of friends, and, most successfully, her writing of poems and letters. (We might acknowledge the significance of Dickinson's exaggeration when she writes to Thomas Higginson: "My Lexicon--was my only companion").⁷ Agoraphobia must be regarded as a serious handicap for her; it provided, however, a kind of structure for her life. The practical, philosophical, and aesthetic concerns of her work reflect this structure. Furthermore, the precision and control associated with Dickinson's metaphors are demonstrated not only in her verse but also in a kind of metaphoric involvement with and control over the world in which she lives.

Dickinson recognizes and credits metaphor as the area in which she can establish the most control. In a Valentine letter anonymously submitted to The Indicator, an Amherst College student publication, Dickinson whimsically demonstrates her faith in metaphor:

Sir, I desire an interview; meet me at sunrise, or sunset, or the new moon--the place is immaterial. In gold, or in purple, or in sackcloth--I look not upon the raiment. With sword, or with pen, or with plough--the weapons are less than wielder. In coach, or in wagon, or walking, the equipage far from the man....

And not to see merely, but a chat, sir, or a tete-a-tete, a confab, a mingling of opposite minds is what I propose to have. We will be David and Jonathan, or Damon and Pythias, or what is better than either, the United States of America. We will talk over what we have learned from the pulpit, the press and the Sabbath School.

This is strong language, but none the less true....

Our friendship, sir, shall endure till sun and moon shall wane no more, till stars shall set, and victims rise to grace the final sacrifice. We'll be instant, in season, out of season, minister, take care of, cherish, sooth, watch, wait, doubt, refrain, reform, elevate, instruct. All choice spirits however distant are ours, ours theirs; there is a thrill of sympathy--a circulation of mutuality--cognationem inter nos! I am Judith the heroine of the Apocrypha, and you the orator of Ephesus.

That's what they call a metaphor in our country. Don't be afraid of it, sir, it won't bite.⁸

She continues by contrasting metaphor and her dog, Carlo ("the noblest work of Art"). Unlike metaphor, she insists, Carlo would defend his "mistress's rights to his end." The author, of course, engages in playful understatement, for metaphor proves an extremely faithful companion to Dickinson. In fact, the letter suggests the poet recognizes the mastery she has in metaphor. The equipage, the raiment are relatively unimportant. "With sword, or with pen, or with plough," the wieider is far more significant, she insists, than the weapon.

Dickinson's attraction to equipage, to disguises and anonymity, to metaphor and "all the truth [told] slant," is revealed also in those rare but dramatic encounters with individuals over whom she had no control. The careful selection of poses often afforded Dickinson as extraordinary a control in personal relationships as her metaphor achieved in language. Too few encounters with the poet are recorded. Of these rare meetings, certainly the visit paid Dickinson by Thomas H. Higginson on August 16, 1870, allows us the greatest penetration of her disguise. Fortunately, the experience was intense enough for Higginson that he chose to share it immediately in a letter to his wife. The night following his visit, he wrote of his impressions of the poet:

A step like a pattering child's in entry and in glided
a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair
and a face a little like Bell Dove's; not plainer--with no

good feature--in a very plain and exquisitely clean white pique and a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand and said "These are my introduction" in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice--and added under her breath "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers and hardly know what to say--but she talked soon and thenceforward continuously and deferentially--sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her--but readily recommencing. Manner between Angie Tilton and Mr. Alcott--but thoroughly ingenuous and simple which they are not and saying many things which you would have thought foolish and I wise....⁹

The poet's fear is unquestionably genuine. By 1870, she was receiving few visitors; meeting Higginson, a man she greatly respected, was very difficult. The sincerity of the childlike pose (Dickinson was nearly forty years old at the time) might be questioned. The effect of the pose is calculable: Higginson is convinced of the poet's simple wisdom, her ingenuousness, even perhaps of her helplessness. The innocent pose is one Dickinson would frequently use. Seven years later, the impressions of Clara Bellinger Green, another visitor, will concur with Higginson's. Dickinson, Green will write, "spoke rapidly, with the breathless voice of a child and with a peculiar charm.... [She was] quaint, simple as a child and wholly unaffected."¹⁰

The simple and "wholly unaffected" child reflects not so much the timid recluse as she does, I believe, the sophisticated ironist. Dickinson has both the capability and willingness to confront under pretense her environment. She often conducts her life as if it were a magnificent understatement: the simple dress, the "steps like a pattering child," the two day lilies (her "introduction"), the "soft frightened breathless childlike voice," the apology for her nervousness. The scene with Higginson seems to have been staged for an effect. She has even included props: two of Higginson's publications, Malbone and

Out-Door Papers, are among the few books that ostensibly add to the furnishings of the parlor. Between herself and others, she often constructs what Richard Sewall has called a "safely ironic distance."¹¹ The person in the parlor representing Dickinson is clearly not completely identifiable with the person managing the occasion. Higginson senses that her apparent restraint conceals a kind of domination or force, and his reaction to the force is, I believe, revealing. He writes to his wife: "I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me."¹²

The "safely ironic distance," established through pose, ensured Dickinson her control, her ability to draw from others without their touching her. For one person, however, Dickinson's guise was a transparency. Austin Dickinson's awareness of his sister's poses in her letters to Higginson are discussed in Mabel Todd's journal: "as to the 'innocent and confiding' nature of them [the letters to Higginson], Austin smiles. He says Emily definitely posed in those letters, he knows her thoroughly, through and through, as no one else ever did."¹³ Apparently Austin had grown accustomed to Emily's reluctance to face directly any situation she considered potentially threatening. After a visit to Boston from his sisters in 1851, Austin wrote to Sue about Emily's growing remoteness: "[We] had some capital time together--Vinnie enjoyed herself, as she always does among strangers--Emily became confirmed in her opinion of the hollowness and awfulness of the world."¹⁴

The "world" for Dickinson more and more became identified with everything over which she had no control. Even changes in Amherst life presented the poet with anxieties from which she quietly withdrew, sometimes secretly and often quite literally. As early as 1853, a letter

to Austin demonstrates a detachment from public life that may well be symbolic of her decision to move into her own interior world. Discussing a community celebration honoring the completion of the Amherst-Belcher-town Railroad, Dickinson writes:

[The day] passed off grandly--so all the people said--it was pretty hot and dusty, but nobody cared for that. Father was as usual, Chief Marshal of the day and went marching around the town like some old Roman General, upon a Triumph Day. Mrs. Howe got a capital dinner, and was much praised. Carriages flew like sparks, hither, and thither and yon, and they all said t'was fine. I spose it was--I sat in Pror Tyler's woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me or ask me how I did.¹⁵

The letter is striking; the discrepancy between the public and the poet's impressions of the event implies alienation. Despite its declarations of approval, the letter might also offer the essential ugliness and horror of the occasion. With almost parenthetical commentary ("so all the people said," "they all said," "I spose it was") and a careful selection of unpleasant details (the dirt, the heat, the crowds), Dickinson's letter persuades us of apprehensions more significant than facts. The public festival becomes an ironic expression of personal anxiety. More than the events it ostensibly states, Dickinson's letter concerns her own fears. Her physical detachment from the celebration signifies perhaps a more profound, more important detachment; the poet recognizes and is finally overwhelmed by the distance between her own and others' perspectives.

We can only imagine what symbolism Dickinson might have attached to the train. Richard Sewall believes the poet's ambivalence is alluded to in a poem about a train written several years after her letter to her brother:

I like to hear it lap the Miles--
 And lick the Valleys up--
 And stop to feed itself at Tanks--
 And then--prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains--
 And supercilious peer
 In Shanties--by the sides of Roads--
 And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides
 And crawl between
 Complaining all the while
 in horrid--hooting stanza--
 Then chase itself down Hill--

And neigh like Boanerges--
 Then--prompter than a Star
 Stop--docile and omnipotent
 At its own stable door--

(J. 585)

In "such details as the 'horrid--hooting stanza', in such words as 'prodigious', 'supercilious', 'complaining', 'omnipotent', and in the image of the monster with its sinister 'docility'," Sewall senses the poet's ambivalence.¹⁶ I find, however, in these examples and in the poem as a whole little evidence of genuine ambivalence. Although initially professing to like the train, Dickinson imagines it a monster whose intentions may not be dangerous (indeed it seems almost without intentions) but whose mere presence represents a threat. Its "prodigious" steps portend the disaster which is the poem's real interest. Its "docility" does not prevent its natural but mindless consumption of the world through which it moves, lapping up the miles and valleys and paring quarries to fit its bulk. An overwhelming fear of change is connected, I believe, with the train/monster metaphor. The omnipotent monster spoils the world with a steady, awful plunder. The real horror of the occasion, however, is the complete absence of control. Once set into motion, the "docile" train responds to a kind of gravitational

amorality: feeding and drinking, crawling through quarries, and then chasing itself downhill. The poet imagines it indomitable, unconsciously driven by an indefinable momentum.

The tension Sewall detects is not generated, I believe, from Dickinson's ambivalence, from any simultaneous feelings of repulsion and attraction; the poem clearly demonstrates the train's unpleasantness. Sewall may detect instead the conflict between the tone (amiable, even light) and the horrifying metaphor. Although the humor may superficially conceal or soften the horror, ultimately it effects a greater sense of fear: a situation out of control is made graver by the narration that fails to make this deduction. The poem might even expand, though probably unintentionally, an earlier response Dickinson sent to her brother: "You asked me about the railroad--Everybody seems pleased at the change in arrangement."¹⁷

Dickinson's inability to influence life's transitions, losses, and deaths, its "changes in arrangements," often forces her, as we know, home. It drives her also, I believe, into poetry, for nowhere is she more at home than in her subtle control of metaphor. In a poem that begins, "I dwell in Possibility," she implies that poetry, with its numerous windows and doors, its infinite roof of sky, is a "fairer House than Prose" (J. 657). Less oblique discourse often fails Dickinson. At times, the challenges and the demand for directness that language can impose even frighten her: "I then ran home again," she tells Austin, "for fear somebody would see me or ask me how I did." As David Porter has pointed out in his discussion of Dickinson's peculiar need for expression:

If she could not speak to strangers, she could at least write. And so writing had absolute privilege for Dickinson,

above speech, above a social life, above the Boston ladies' conversation club to which Higginson once invited her.¹⁸ Only in writing could the Dickinson words wield power.

The mastery she obsessively seeks but cannot with certainty rely upon in life is realized in verse, in the metaphor that is, paradoxically, both expressive and ambiguous, that is convincing but reluctant to communicate.

Indeed, the most successful of Dickinson's poems are among the most ambiguous. In Dickinson's best poems, we discover something vaguely uncomfortable, something only nearly said. Although sometimes precisely constructed, the metaphor is not discursive. Dickinson will suggest without disclosing. However, disclosure will feel to us imminent, as if we had merely overlooked it, as if yet one more reading might uncover it. At its best, as we shall see, the poet's style exaggerates the indiscernible, manipulates coyness as if it were exhibitionism, and builds poems around assumptions that have not even been made.

A comparison of two versions of Dickinson's "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--" (J. 216) demonstrates her mastery of ambiguity. The earlier version, the less difficult and less ambiguous of the two, lacks the subtle effectiveness characteristic of the poet's best work. The significant changes occur in the second stanza:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--
 Untouched by Morning
 And untouched by Noon--
 Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection--
 Rafter of satin,
 And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
 In her Castle above them--
 Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
 Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence--
 Ah, what sagacity perished here

(version of 1859)

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--
 Untouched by Morning--
 And untouched by Noon--
 Lie the meek members of the Resurrection--
 Rafter of Satin--and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the years--in the Crescent--above them--
 Worlds scoop their Arcs--
 And Firmaments--row--
 Diadems--drop--and Doges--surrender--
 Soundless as dots--on a Disc of Snow--
 (version of 1861)

In the earlier version, the wisdom of the elite and possibly arrogant members of the Resurrection is perhaps too easily challenged by the "ignorant cadences" of nature: the babbling bee, the piping birds, the laughing breeze. Mindless and yet content in its own kind of resurrection, the world ignores the chosen members whose own rebirth, though promised, seems unlikely. Irony is implicit in the resurrection, or at least in the full affirmation, of life continuous in the vernal "castle" above the grave. Too predictably, the imaginative argument concludes with the poem's discursive summation. The final exclamation seems mercilessly contemptuous: "Ah, what sagacity perished here!" Pomposity initially associated with the self-assured members of the Resurrection is transferred, unintentionally and faultily, I believe, to the equally self-assured narrator. The "ah" is uttered by a voice too conscious of its own triumph, a voice too eagerly introduced into the argument to be either completely convincing or completely satisfying.

Although more difficult to explicate, the second version demonstrates the subtle control and detachment of which Dickinson's language is capable. An apparent objectivity, almost mathematical, replaces the intrusive, overtly cynical narration of the first version. The revision is a less decorative, more sparsely executed poem. Both the interjectional indicators (the "ah" and the exclamation mark) and the qualifiers suggestive

of an editorial involvement ("stolid," "ignorant") have been eliminated. The second version accomplishes an aesthetic distance which affords the argument both a clearly impersonal but absolute legitimacy.

A puzzling gain of ambiguity and a loss of concreteness typical of Dickinson's "sceneless poetry" accompany the acquisition of this authority. Crescents, worlds, and arcs replace castles, bees, and birds. The simple continuation of life implicit in the frivolity of nature (laughing, babbling, and piping) is replaced with a kind of absolute continuation nearly abstracted from discernible activity altogether. Erasing an imaginable nature, Dickinson leaves us only a trace. It is, however, the special kind of trace, distinguished in Dickinson's best poetry, which might be associated with formulas or measurement. Vitality is exchanged for a cold geometric certainty gained from the effusive use of circles and semicircles: years in the crescent; worlds scooping arcs; the implied circular motion of rowing; the shapes of crowns (diadems), dots, and discs. Ignoring or superseding empirical realities, the language of the poem points toward other realities, realities difficult to articulate exactly. Despite repeated analysis, "dots on a disc of snow" will remain largely inexplicable, and yet it captures completely the essence of soundlessness. The image impresses us as effortless and flawless, as if it were merely articulating something too obvious, something always known, as if soundlessness were intrinsic to those dots we often found on discs of snow. Even though these dots cannot be defined or located or clearly imagined, they strike us as a reasonable representation of the silence about which the poet speaks.

The authority the poem assumes is generated, I believe, not externally but from within the poem itself. Carefully selected words,

their associations enlarged through metaphor, produce a reality both indisputable and inexplicable: the relationship between the surrendering doges (and the dropped diadems) and the dots on the disc of snow is impenetrable though based upon their mutual soundlessness. Typically Dickinson, the simile does not provide a clear transfer of information.¹⁹ However, the metaphoric structure itself may raise certain assumptions about the words it carries which perhaps the poet has taken advantage of: we may accept the potential for an analogy even before the comparison, the transfer of information, can be understood. Furthermore, the richly associative possibilities of the words may contribute to a sense of completion. Both dots and soundlessness point toward the infinitesimal. However, a desire for completeness is ultimately satisfied not solely through the associative power of words but with the assistance of resemblied sounds: "diadems drop" and "dots." Since the dropped diadems and the surrendered doges are nearly synonymous in the poem, the relationship between "doges surrender" and "dots on a disc of snow" is reinforced; a kind of comparableness now seems possible. Paradoxically, feelings of completion in the Dickinson poem result not from clarification or identification but from the associations the poem opens and the possible ambiguities this expansion allows.

Dickinson's use of the associative power of words in the later version is evocative and yet characteristically hard to grasp. Because the network of relationships is so intricate, individual threads are hard to extricate from the poem. We can, however, indicate the possible evolution and direction of effects the poem creates. Coldness, soundlessness, insignificance, inactivity, and impermanence are all qualities the poem suggests. Their close and often strange connections blur individuations; the results are often unexpected. Associations completed

in the second stanza, for example, may render much of the first stanza ironic. A shared translucence and whiteness (and perhaps coldness) allow the hard alabaster and the impermanent snow a surprising but logical relationship. The connection may invite us to reconsider the stone's durability. In the vast scheme of things, in the grand movement of years in the crescent, alabaster is, after all, nearly as impermanent as the snow. Recognition of one relationship may lead us, now skeptical, to search for other relationships and for the poem's greater irony. If the alabaster and the snow are somehow similar, perhaps the members within the alabaster chamber and the dots on the disc of snow also share an identity. The likelihood is strengthened with evidence of mutual stillness or even passivity; the dots are soundless, and the members of the Resurrection lie in sleep or death.

Other relationships, more complex, suggest the mutuality and eventual equality of the dots and the faithful members. The obvious similarity between "doges surrender" and "diadems drop" has been mentioned. Less obvious, but no less important, is the presence of several "falling" actions, implicit and explicit, in the second stanza: in the metonymic "diadems drop" (crowns or kingdoms surrender or fall), in the falling or fallen snow (suggested by the soundlessness of the dots on a disc of snow) and in the connotations of surrendering which suggest both dropping and falling. The potential for comparison between the elite members of the Resurrection in the first stanza and the elite members of the kingdoms or governments in the second stanza obviously exists. The associations the poem has produced between kingdoms and "dots on a disc of snow" will force us, I believe, into a reconsideration of the members and their importance. The cumulative effect of the poem's several associations has been to set the dots and the members into a

a kind of equation. In a sense they are both equal. Both, we may decide, are impermanent and wholly inconsequential.

In the second version, therefore, the members' "sagacity" seems no longer an issue worthy of comment. The poem is most convincing in its near abandonment of the Resurrection members. The final stanza expands away from them; their fate, absorbed within a larger fate, is simply no longer of primary interest. Irony interjected into the first version now seems subtle, accidental. It is, however, a discovery the poet encourages the reader to make. Dickinson's careful selection of words and their surprising associations allow the poem its effectiveness and the poet an articulation that seems freed of subjectivity.

Apparently concerned about the possible subjectivity of her work, the poet writes Higginson in July 1862: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the verse--it does not mean me--but a supposed person."²⁰ This disclaimer is characteristically Dickinson. It expresses, I believe, her agoraphobic demands for both articulation ("I state myself") and anonymity ("a supposed person"). The supposed person is the same who conceals her fears of change and her religious skepticism in metaphors. She is the same "supposed person" who, childlike and with day lilies, introduces herself in the Dickinson parlor. She is the "wholly unaffected" child who could, as Higginson carefully observed, draw from others without their touching her. When she succeeds, as she often does in verse, Dickinson's needs for both control and freedom from conflict are met. When she succeeds, Dickinson is hardly ever clear but nearly always effective and strangely articulate.

As a student of Dickinson's life, I am confident many of the poems concern the difficult articulation of her agoraphobic experiences. As a careful reader, however, I cannot always assume this with certainty.

Appreciating a Dickinson poem does not mean "solving" the poem's ambiguities. More useful, I believe, is recognizing the stylistic role of ambiguity in a poem's effect. Dickinson often concerns herself with admittedly "Retrieveless things" (J. 532), or rather the traces they leave behind. Her penchant for the "afterness" of experiences often renders occasions obscure and nearly inaccessible: the "after-Horror" (J. 286), the "formal feeling" that comes "After great pain" (J. 341). Many of her poems draw their vague images from a kind of residual or echo world where traces and effects dominate objects and situations. In one of Dickinson's best-known poems, the impressions in the mind are treated almost independently of the object whose motion had caused them:

A Route of Evanescence
 With a revolving Wheel--
 A resonance of Emerald--
 A Rush of Cochineal--
 And Every Blossom on the Bush
 Adjusts its tumbled Head--
 The mail from Tunis, probably,
 An easy Morning's Ride.
 (J. 1463)

In his analysis of the poem, Roland Hagenbuchle explains an effect typical of many of Dickinson's poems:

The poet does not try to account for what appears, but how it appears and affects the mind. Instead of focusing on the world of objects, she concentrates on consciousness as such. In our poem the impressions--partly visual, partly auditory--left by the object have in common the element of a rapidly fading but nonetheless intensive after-effect.²¹

The precipitating event is given neither an experiential nor a referential moment in the poem's cosmos: the event is not in the poem and does not seem to be in the poem's "memory." With an occasion as specific as the

movement of a hummingbird (as in "A Route of Evanescence"), the poet sometimes leaves us clues in related poems and in letters.²² However, in some poems, poems in which the poet herself may not understand the occasion (perhaps a panic episode), stylistic ambiguities may suggest experiential ambiguities. Metaphors in these poems record only, I believe, the effects of some intense yet indefinite experience: "After great pain / The Nerves sit ceremonious," the "stiff Heart," the "Frost of Death" (J. 341). Although the ambiguities preclude the possibility of defining the occasion as specifically agoraphobic, the alienation and detachment, both genuine effects the poem creates, strongly suggest an agoraphobic distancing from experience.

In other poems, particularly several of the definition poems, the afterness of experience is represented by the pronoun which is treated independently of antecedent, the pronoun that nearly demonstrates an integrity of its own. In "It was not Death" (J. 510), traces of an antecedent exist within the poem; the antecedent itself, however, seems to remain just outside the poem:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down--
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos--crawl--
Nor Fire--for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool--

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine--

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some--

When everything that ticked--has stopped--
 And Space stares all around--
 Or Grisly frosts--first Autumn morns,
 Repeal the Beating Ground--

But most, like Chaos--Stopless--cool--
 Without a Chance, or Spar--
 Or even a Report of Land--
 To justify--Despair.

As the metaphors limit, sharpen, and eliminate the possible antecedents, the pronoun develops a kind of wholeness or soundness that stops, it seems, just short of identification. A name is not given for the experience even though we have become familiar with it. The unidentified experience feels to us strangely complete.

Familiarity is established through a constellation or nearly reportable characteristics extractable from the several metaphors. The narrator emphatically and immediately eliminates death as the referential experience ("It was not Death," the poet insists in the first line). "Deathness," nevertheless, surfaces throughout the poem: in the "Burial" and the "shaven" self "fitted to a frame"; in the cessation of breath and the ticking that has stopped; perhaps even in the "Night" and the "Frost." Death becomes most important, however, when we recognize its juxtaposition with other images (other dismissed antecedents). The list of posited and then eliminated antecedents includes incongruous or contradictory images: "Frost" and "Fire," for example, and "Frost" (frozen water) and "Siroccos" (warm winds). Because the poem will eliminate all antecedents, incompatibility is also eliminated.

More important, I believe, are the similarities revealed by the parade of antecedents; the poem retains some trace of the dismissed antecedents: "it tasted, like them all." Having first perhaps thought the experience was death, the narrator rejects death on the evidence

of her own posture ("for I stood up, / And all the Dead lie down"): death and the speaker exist in different planes. Simply and unequivocally, the speaker still lives. As with other Dickinson poems, the occasion seems geometrically reduced to an essence which can be traced or followed only in the mind. The inclusion of night suggests a point or plane of intersection. Something (a deathness) is searched for in the night (and in the other images). Without specifically knowing and identifying the antecedent, the poet establishes an intimacy with the antecedent's attributes: "it" is perhaps blinding, chilling; it paralyzes and perhaps overwhelms. The experience strikes us as both familiar and inaccessible.

Sharon Cameron, examining the reluctance of Dickinson to anchor her poetry in certainty, discusses the apparent absence of referents in the poems:

Dickinson presents us with states of feelings that are severed from the geography that would explain them, and many poems begin with a deliberately unspecified "it." We are never quite certain whether the subject is death or a horror so manifestly unspeakable that it evades all attempts at direct meaning.²³

Cameron further acknowledges that Dickinson's poems do not lack a "situational matrix." The poet, however, transforms the matrix in order to dramatize "the heart of the experience rather than its outward shape."²⁴ I believe that a clear "situational matrix" that might give the experience an "outward shape" is often unavailable to Dickinson herself. Situations which would explain the feelings are "manifestly unspeakable" not because of their horror, though horrible they may be, but because they are ambiguously experienced.

The ambiguous experience alluded to in "It was not Death" strongly suggests extreme anxiety and perhaps even panic. The narrator's feelings of diminishment and entrapment may imply the overwhelming effect of the experience. At the metaphoric center of the experience (in the coffin or frame), she has been "shaven" to fit the frame, as if Death had overtaken her (although "it was not Death"). These paralytic fears may remind us of our modern agoraphobic's experience: "I felt as though it were impossible to move. It was as if I had been taken over by some stronger force." Dickinson's victim complains that "space stares all around"; our modern subject complains that "all the people [were] looking at me--just faces, no bodies, all merged into one." Our diagnosed agoraphobic fears the course of her episode will lead to death; Dickinson's speaker simply identifies with the dead, "set orderly" for burial. Their predicament, she tells us, "Reminded me, of mine--." She repeatedly fails to articulate the difficult experience, to identify her "it." Her centrality has denied her a perspective. In a poem discussed earlier (J. 410), the unidentified "it" unfurls its horror until it blocks the speaker's eyes. In both poems the narrator's failure to distance herself from the overwhelming experience interferes with her articulation of that experience.

The narrator's sense of diminishment and entrapment, paradoxically, allows her a kind of detachment from the experience. A subjectivity/objectivity split, strongly indicative of extreme anxiety, probably panic, manifests itself in the familiar and yet somewhat dissimilar self that is the poem's focus. The narrator recognizes but does not identify with the subject in the coffin (the image in the frame). The personal experience seems like an impersonal observation. Ironically, this

distance between the narrator and the experience, metaphorically captured in the spectator/participant separation, allows for a kind of perspective; the experience can only be articulated metaphorically. It can only be alluded to. The personal experience, the funeral, the narrator admits, "Reminded me, of mine."

More important in this poem than suggestions of agoraphobic panic (feelings of detachment and of being overwhelmed) is the poet's conscious display of what I will call inarticulation. The poem, which ostensibly begins by examining an experience, eventually examines the reluctance of that experience to be expressed. The narrator's attempt to define the situation should simply involve identifying the right antecedent for the pronoun. As the definition progresses (or fails to progress), interest in the speaker's struggle to locate the antecedent begins to dominate the interest in the experience itself. Definition by the poem's circuitous route (the elimination, one by one, of possible antecedents) seems unlikely: the number of inapposite antecedents (it was not death, frost, fire, etc.) is theoretically unlimited. In view of the poem's continued failure to define, the compulsion to identify the experience is nearly absurd: the narrator never establishes even the first word of the definition. When the poem ends, an articulation of the experience is probably no closer than when the poem began.

Several readers, nonetheless, have suggested that the poem does specifically identify the antecedent. Joanne Fiet Diehl believes the poem's conclusion addresses a kind of despair:

The end of Dickinson's poem is desperation. Space itself "stares all around": this paralysis is "most, like Chaos--stopless--cool" with nothing to repeal it. Not even hope enters here....²⁵

Suzanne Juhasz sees the poem moving to confront despair directly. The poem, she explains, begins with a narrator who

cannot name what she feels, can only say "it." The last line arrives at the name itself; by tuning the definition of her condition more finely, the poem ends with the name. [The] word has been understood through a process of linguistic measurements that has surrounded it with concrete shapes and thereby revealed the most terrible negative and formless mental experience, despair.²⁶

I would disagree with Juhasz's assertion that "the poem attempts to confront despair directly." I believe the poet offers despair as simply another effect of the experience. Furthermore, the "definition" does not progressively "tune" the condition, as Juhasz maintains, with concrete shapes. The progression of the poem actually avoids the expected definiteness and concreteness (the "Report of Land"). The "shapes" surrounding the experience are extraordinarily shapeless and abstract ("space," "chaos"). The definition and the search for an antecedent end in confusion; nothing is settled or certain. We have watched language take the narrator and her narration for a metaphorical boat ride (in a spariess boat) into the middle of an unidentified experience that is "most like chaos." Evasion, not confrontation, is the poem's outcome.

The poem, nevertheless, does move toward a kind of articulation which is realized in the final stanza's "Chaos." In language the ambiguity can be almost eliminated. The poem offers an approximate antecedent for the experience: "It" is "most, like Chaos." However, the experience remains problematic, largely unclear for us. Like the "Phantom" in Dickinson's letter, "chaos" provides an illusory solution. We feel we know what chaos is, but if we examine closely what we know

about it, its concreteness crumbles into a pile of abstractions; we discover the container we thought we had is really a void. It cannot be located or ordered, and it is immanently disordered. As the poem's metaphors eliminate the possible antecedents, the focus on the experience becomes less well defined. Chaos may point toward the intense yet ambiguous experience itself, but it also points to and comments on the failure of language to define the experience.

The poet demonstrates her awareness of the difficult articulation of certain experiences in her peculiar and frequent use of death and madness. Several readers regard death (the funeral) in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (J. 280) as a metaphor for the progression into madness:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading--treading--till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through--

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum--
Kept beating--beating--till I thought
My Mind was going numb--

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space--began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here--

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down--
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing--then--

Sharon Cameron traces the narrator's fall and calls it "the death of consciousness."²⁷ She believes that the poem recreates

the stages in the speaker's loss of consciousness, and this loss of consciousness is a dramatization of the deadening forces that today would be known as repression.²⁸

Cameron's conclusion essentially concurs with J. V. Cunningham's belief that the poem represents a psychotic episode which ends when the speaker loses consciousness.²⁹

Although I would agree that the poem's "treading" procession of mourners and cadenced drumbeat indicate a progression of some kind, I am reluctant to accept Cameron's discovery of the poem's psychotic occasion. Rarely does Dickinson's metaphor relinquish its ambiguity so easily. Cameron and Cunningham's contention that the poem recreates a loss of consciousness or the "deadening forces" associated with a psychotic swoon ignores important facts. Certainly the procession seems destined to find its broken-plank metaphor (with its obvious allusion to madness), but the movement also emphasizes, perhaps more emphatically than madness, the idea of release and expansion. Of course the "sense [that] was breaking through" naturally portends the collapse "in Reason" in the final stanza. A closer look at this too obvious metaphor, however, suggests discrepancies in the psychotic argument. "Sense breaking through" sounds nearly idiomatic in its suggestion of a gain, rather than a loss, of reason. Furthermore, the result of the plunge is not clearly or solely a fall into madness. The downward and tumbling motion, though precipitated by a collapse in reason, results in a kind of expansion of reason: the narrator is acquainted with "a World, at every plunge...."

Throughout its development, the poem has focused upon such ambiguities. Ostensibly, the funeral announces the death of reasoning. However, the procession may be a metaphor for the unnamed experience

which the speaker locates in the brain, or mind. Although the death metaphor remains throughout the poem, the funereal imagery is transformed; it loses the implication of ritual and order and gains a more surrealistic and disordered appearance. The "public" ritual (the funeral) becomes the private, mental chaos. The predictable "treading" and drumming yield to the more sensational and overwhelming, and more ambiguous, tolling or "Space." The declaration of the bell might announce either jubilation or catastrophe with the same undifferentiated sound. The final line is appropriately ambiguous: "And Finished knowing-- then--." We cannot say with certainty whether the experience has been epiphanic or deadening, whether the poem ends with a new knowledge that transcends language altogether or whether knowing, consciousness itself, is finished. Dickinson, I believe, intentionally refuses to articulate this important distinction. We are denied precise definition of the occasion, even the effect remains vaguely uncertain. Indeed, the final ambiguous moment might offer ambiguity itself as the only salient feature of the experience.

The intensity of the experience cannot be questioned; the experience defies reason whose plank cannot support it. It is difficult to imagine an episode (mental or psychical, psychotic or agoraphobic, panic or epiphanic) requiring as intense and complicated a metaphor as Dickinson's "funeral of the Brain." These metaphors, however, occur frequently in Dickinson's work. In her discussion of Dickinson's poems about madness, Barbara Mossberg suggests we cannot discover the exact experience these poems are metaphors for unless we look at the poet's life.³⁰ Withdrawn and isolated, almost certainly agoraphobic, Dickinson, I believe, spent her prodigious career searching for and inventing a language with which

to articulate the profound and utterly isolating experiences of her life. In the final two chapters of this work, I will look specifically at Dickinson's use of death and madness. I will demonstrate how these two metaphors reflect the agoraphobic preoccupation with language. Generally speaking, we might surmise that these two tropes provide Dickinson a way into her experience, a means by which it might be explored. Perhaps more important, metaphor provides her a way out, allowing her both control and distance. The metaphoric mumblings of her split minds and the silences of her funerals and graves speak about her frustrations and fears. They speak also of the alienation that manifests itself, and perhaps begins for her, in language. The "thing so terrible" is perhaps nothing more than a kind of silence, the inability to utter oneself when self-utterance seems most important.

Notes

¹ Barbara Welter, Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 60.

² J. Christopher Clarke and Wayne Wardman, Agoraphobia: A Clinical and Personal Account (Sydney: Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 35.

³ "To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson)," 15 January 1853, Letter 154, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 283-84.

⁴ Geoffrey L. Thorpe and Laurence E. Burns, The Agoraphobic Syndrome: Behavioural Approaches to Evaluation and Treatment (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983), p. 13.

⁵ David Porter, Dickinson: The Modern Idiom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 114-16.

⁶ Texts for the Dickinson poems are from the edition by Thomas H. Johnson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955). Poems are referred to by the numbers given them in the Johnson edition and by the opening lines.

- 7 "To T. W. Higginson," 25 April 1862, Letter 261.
- 8 "To George H. Gould," February 1850, Letter 34.
- 9 Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), II, 151.
- 10 Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), II, 564.
- 11 Sewall, II, 438.
- 12 Leyda, II, 152.
- 13 Sewall, II, 538.
- 14 Sewall, II 435.
- 15 "To Austin Dickinson," 13 June 1853, Letter 127.
- 16 Sewall, II, 437.
- 17 "To Austin Dickinson," 10 November 1853, Letter 140.
- 18 Porter, p. 141.
- 19 Roland Hagenbuchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," ESQ, 20, No. 1 (1974), p. 35.
- 20 "To T. W. Higginson," July 1862, Letter 268.
- 21 Hagenbuchle, p. 34.
- 22 See "Within my Garden, rides a Bird" (J. 500) and Dickinson's letter to Mabel Loomis Todd of October 1882, Letter 700.
- 23 Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 15.
- 24 Cameron, p. 15.
- 25 Joanne Fiet Diehl, Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 117.
- 26 Suzanne Juhasz, The Undiscovered Continent (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 69.
- 27 Cameron, p. 97.
- 28 Cameron, p. 96.
- 29 J. V. Cunningham, "Sorting Out: The Case of Dickinson," in Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1976), p. 373.

³⁰ Barbara Antonia Clarke Mossberg, Emily Dickinson: When a Writer Is a Daughter (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 31.

"A GEOMETRIC JOY--":
DICKINSON AND THE AGORAPHOBIC PERSPECTIVE

In the poems of Emily Dickinson, a reader notices an affinity for outlines. He discovers perimeters and boundaries, both implied and stated. Butterflies cruise "round the purple line" (J. 137) or go nowhere in "purposeless Circumference" (J. 351); rain "curves" (J. 1235), "words scoop their Arcs--," and "circles hesitate" (J. 216). Structures enclosed by these lines can be as transpicuous as spiders' webs or as impenetrable as a fortress, a tomb, or a "house without a door" (J. 475). Areas can be as restrictive as dungeons, closets, and cocoons or as airy as a "solitary Acre" (J. 742). Although some of the spaces circumscribed by the poet gain familiarity (the prison that gets to be a home), others remain as terrifying and as foreign as the haunted chambers of the speaker's own mind.

Often boundaries exclude the Dickinson narrator from much of the world. At the same time, however, they may describe a world of her own design, subject to her own controls. Rather than reflecting a general chaos, the poetic imagination (Dickinson's house or "Possibilities") seems to offer specific, although often transient, metaphoric alternatives to chaos. Geometric metaphors, whether realized in the house or the prison or the tomb, cut out from chaos certain reasonable, manageable proportions. The poet acknowledges the vulnerability of metaphoric spaces; yet it is the work, and the joy, of the imagination within the Dickinson poem to assume that such spaces are divorced from

the chaos out of which they are formed and by which they are surrounded. The imaginative structuring enforces, I believe, a kind of stability upon an environment Dickinson often found unpredictable and incoherent.

This supposition opposes much of the widespread speculation about Dickinson's perceptions and their relationship to her treatment of reality. In what one critic has labeled, correctly I believe, the "deeply inventive psychobiography" After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson,¹ John Cody offers some interesting observations of depersonalization and derealization in Dickinson's poems. I will later show that Cody unfortunately uses these observations as evidence toward his speculative conclusions about Dickinson's break with reality. The assertion of another reader, Diane Wolosky, that Dickinson both confronts and resists incoherence seems essentially sound. However, Wolosky believes Dickinson's resistance ultimately fails: "[The poet's] prosody, syntax, and figuration ... remain expressive of her vision of reality. In both language and nature there is lacking, and oppressive in its lack, any design that could transfer this clutter into [a] significant pattern."² David Porter, in his 1981 consideration of Dickinson's work, captures the prevailing attitude about the poet's treatment of reality: "We [can] find no original reality at the source" of the poet's language. "Not only does her language not order confusion, it [springs] from purposelessness itself" and even compounds it. The chaotic style reflects her own perception of her situation which "is in the heart of confusion itself."³ Perhaps the weakest part of Porter's often fine work argues, in a chapter appropriately called "The Curse of Spontaneity," that Dickinson engages in a kind of gratuitous word shuffling, in which the "tropes are everything, the expressive medium and the content itself,

the signifiers and the signified inseparable."⁴

I agree that the Dickinson perception of reality often seems to originate in and address chaos and alienation, but I would challenge the notion that this perception is usually transferred into designless or chaotic poetry. For Dickinson, it seems, there is no truth except for the distinct impression of truth that only can be created by relative distances and positions, what Dickinson might describe as a "Geometric Joy" (J. 652), the predictability of constant ratios or relationships. Rather than reflecting perceptions of discontinuity (both in her environment and in her own mind), the point of view suggested by many of the poems provides a stay against such confusion. Susan Juhasz approaches such a conclusion about Dickinson's poetry:

Whatever the particular origins of her sense of estrangement, the austere originality of Dickinson's poetry develops from the terror of her reaction, from her conversion of a potentially crippling alienation into a conception of language that serves as a defense against what she perceived not simply as an antipathetic society, but also as an adversarial nature and an inscrutable, if not fundamentally hostile, deity.⁵

If Dickinson's poems successfully speak of detachment and alienation, they also offer a defense against chaos and flux by eliminating, as we shall see, reality beyond the specific poetic situation. There seems to remain, however, in the body of her work and in the best of the individual poems the underlying apprehension of impending chaos and panic, the possibility of collapse and recurring collapse. Ironically, this tension or anxiety often provides the poem's greatest interest, both thematically and stylistically. In the worst poems, Dickinson forces this tension beyond some reasonable limit, and the poems seem incomprehensible or simply anarchic. In the best poems, however, chaos

will seem still one haunted "corridor" behind us, the collapse of heaven still one "atom" away.

The problem of stabilizing and verifying one's own reality appears to be Dickinson's task in much of her poetry. Dickinson's chaos characteristically lacks differentiation and distinctness. In one poem, she will remind us of the self who would be consumed by another, "The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea-- / Forget[ting] her own locality" (J. 284). She will acknowledge, in another poem, the instability of identification:

This Dust, and it's Feature--
Accredited--Today--
Will in a second Future--
Cease to identify--

(J. 936)

Sometimes the narrator's own sensations seem frightfully alienating:

I heard, as if I had no Ear
Until a Vital Word
Came all the way from Life to me
And then I knew I heard.

I saw, as if my Eye were on
Another, till a Thing
And now I know 'twas Light, because
It ritted them, came in.

(J. 1039)

Paradoxically, the very senses which should verify the self's identity are experienced as foreign and, as we see in the penultimate stanza, serve a sense of derealization:

I dwelt, as if Myself were out,
My Body but within

In a fourth example (J. 351), the speaker's anxieties necessitate a kind of self-inventory:

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there--
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler--

I turned my Being round and round
And paused at every pound
To ask the Owner's name--
For doubt, that I should know the Sound--

A sense of unrealness is evidenced by the distinction made between the speaker and her subject: "I turned my Being...." The temporal as well as the spatial distance between the narrator and her image implies detachment. She must wait for a response:

I judged my features--jarred my hair--
I pushed my dimples by, and waited--
If they--twinkled back--
Conviction might, of me--

For Dickinson flux remains always the terrifying basis of reality. In an early letter to her friend Mrs. J. G. Holland, Dickinson recounts her family's move to a new house. The letter reflects the profound effects of transition ("transit") upon the poet.

I cannot tell you how we moved. I had rather not remember. I believe my "effects" were brought in a box, and the "deathless me," on foot, not many moments after. I took at the time a memorandum of my several senses, and also of my hat and coat, and my best shoes--but it was lost in the melee, and I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.

Such wits as I reserved, are so badly shattered that repair is useless--and still I can't help laughing at my own catastrophe. I supposed we were going to make a "transit," as heavenly bodies did--but we came budget by budget ... till we fulfilled the pantomime contained in the word "moved." It is a kind of gone-to-Kansas feeling, and if I sat in a long wagon, with my family tied behind, I should suppose without doubt I was a party of emigrants!

They say that "home is where the heart is." I think it is where the house is, and the adjacent buildings.⁶

Despite its comic tone, the letter shows evidence of Dickinson's adjustment to changes in her environment. The move creates for her the sense of derealization and depersonalization: at her new home, she is compelled to take inventory ("a memorandum") not only of her effects but of her senses as well. Her sense of alienation in her new surroundings appears to us exaggerated: she imagines herself an "emigrant" and complains of "a kind of gone-to-Kansas feeling." The move itself seems to her unreal, a pretense or "pantomime" to be "fulfilled." Her life has been "badly shattered" in the "melee"; her "wits" fragmented by the "catastrophe."

The letter also suggests the close association between Dickinson's concept of home and her concept of self. Her concern seems to be for a recognizable and fully coherent sense of self; however, self-integration is accomplished only through a redefinition of place. Most important in the letter, I believe, is the final line with its comic demand for concreteness and predictability. The security implied in the word "home" seems possible only after she locates and identifies spatially the "house ... and the adjacent buildings."

In her discussion of Dickinson's failure to complete a religious conversion, Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes the anxieties associated with the creation of self-identity:

All human beings think of the self as a consciousness that is situated in some specific place; thus the capacity to identify 'me' is contingent upon the ability to designate some space that is 'not me'.

Dickinson's enormous fear of losing herself within an all-powerful yet amorphous deity, Wolff argues, may have prevented her Christian rebirth: "conversion demanded an utter relinquishment of self.... For Emily Dickinson such an act of abnegation seemed beyond the realm of possibility."⁸ The identification of the self ('me') for the phobic Dickinson seems, in fact, dependent upon concrete representation and specific localities. The self in many of the poems, I believe, is specifically associated with the house in which it dwells. Home, and the security it suggests for the individual, is geometrized, actualized in the house (or as we will see in many of the poems, a surrogate structure). The house becomes for Dickinson a kind of metaphor for the self; she associates an integrated self-concept with a familiarized and predictable environment. Her poems, as I will show, pay serious attention to the points, lines, angles, and the arrangements of surface details. When considered in relationship to one another, these details suggest stable configurations.

Conversely, tension is manifested within the poems by the suggestion, often subtly masked by the poet's ironic use of tone, that collapse, disappearance (fading), or even explosion may jeopardize these structures. Blindness and darkness are often feared because these states alter perspectives; the geometry of the landscape can no longer be depended upon or even ascertained.

The house metaphor offers Dickinson the most satisfactory example of predictability and control. In a poem that may suggest the importance of maintaining boundaries, Dickinson takes an ironic look at her situation by placing herself outside the house. Rather than struggling to leave the house (perhaps a more likely situation for the homebound

Dickinson), the narrator struggles to enter:

I Years had been from Home
And now before the Door
I dared not enter, lest a Face
I never saw before

Stare stolid into mine
And ask my Business there--
"My Business but a Life I left
Was such remaining there?"

I leaned upon the Awe--
I lingered with Before--
The Second like an Ocean rolled
And broke against my ear--

I laughed a crumbling Laugh
That I could fear a Door
Who Consternation compassed
And never winced before.

I fitted to the Latch
My Hand, with trembling care
Lest back the awful Door should spring
And leave me in the Floor--

Then moved my Fingers off
As cautiously as Glass
And held my ears, and like a Thief
Fled gasping from the House--
(J. 609)

The situation of the poem is uncomplicated: the long-absent wayfarer returns home. Her hand poised anxiously above the latch of the door, she pauses at that moment before entry. Of course the house must represent many things: childhood, family, innocence, a sense of place. She fears the unknown, the changes personified in the stranger whose "face [she] never saw before--." In the stolid stare, she will encounter insensitivity or perhaps her own foreignness and the disjunction between the past and the present moments. The situation of the poem is complicated by Dickinson's uncharacteristic use of the

house symbol. In this one poem, she associates fear not with spaces beyond the boundaries of the home but rather the area behind the "awful Door," the home space itself. The poem becomes, I believe, a metaphor for the quest to find one's identity, a quest for self-identity. First, one must come "home": our narrator admits her "Business" there is "but a Life I left." The reply, of course, is ironic for her investment is actually great. She fears a schism between the assumed self, the one she carries with her to the door, and the unfamiliar self, the stranger who lives in the house. (In another poem, she will refer to this stranger as "Ourself behind ourself.") Perhaps Dickinson's own fears of transient, external boundaries may only reflect a greater fear of incomprehensible, chaotic internal spaces. The poem's climax occurs at the moment our returned daughter, unable or unwilling to face the stranger, flees "like a Thief" from the house. The fear that the "stolid" occupant might respond with an impassive negation finally overwhelms. She realizes that the identity she has come to claim may seem alien to her.

In the first stanza of another poem (J. 475), Dickinson examines the other side of the door, a more common position for her:

Doom is the House without the Door--
 'Tis entered from the Sun--
 And then the Ladder's thrown away,
 Because Escape--is done--

The poem's paradox suggests an ambivalence: freedom and imprisonment seem nearly synonymous. "Escape" is accomplished by getting in, apparently through a doorless house ("Tis entered from the Sun") and then destroying the possibility of departure ("the Ladder's thrown away"). The "escape," of course, also entraps and is, therefore, regarded as a kind of "Doom." Diane Wolosky believes the paradoxical

search in the poem is for an "inward infinity" which must result in claustrophobia:

The possibility of the self as an entrapping circle is often recorded by Dickinson. Withdrawn into herself, she suddenly senses that she may have locked herself in with an "awful Mate" (J. 894).... It is a terrifying nightmare of the self caught within itself.

Dickinson's narrator will warn, in another poem, of the "superior Spectre," "Ourself behind ourself." Galloping through the back corridors of the brain, he will "startle most--":

One need not be a Chamber--to be Haunted--
One need not be a House--
The Brain has Corridors--surpassing
Material Place--

Far safer of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than it's interior Confronting--
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase--
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter--
In lonesome Place--

Ourself behind ourself, concealed--
Should startle most--
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body--borrows a Revolver--
He bolts the Door--
O'erlooking a superior spectre--
Or More--

(J. 670)

As we shall see, the poem's setting suggests striking psychological metaphors. These settings perhaps prefigure Freud and the modern writers in whose works the subconscious locality is so important. Ironically, Dickinson's insights have been used by some critics

and biographers (discussed later in this chapter) as evidence of psychosis rather than lucidity. Recent criticism, however, has moved in a direction that considers the immediacy of the mind and the exploration of intimate psychic phenomena in Dickinson's work:

Dickinson is the American poet whose work consisted in exploring states of psychic extremity....In fact, Dickinson was a great psychologist; she began with the material she had at hand: herself. She had to possess the courage to enter through language, states which most people deny or veil with silence.¹⁰

Dickinson is separated from "most people" by her desire to discuss her peculiar experiences. In her poetry she attempts to imagine and to articulate, to enjoy and even sometimes to ridicule, phenomena usually unavailable to language.

We should keep in mind, I believe, the historical context of the poems, the milieu which must have compelled Dickinson to undertake the metaphoric probing of her own mind. In the nineteenth century, complex phobias, such as Dickinson seems to have experienced, were misunderstood and poorly documented. Accounts of agoraphobic-like behavior certainly occur in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, even before. Hippocrates "reports on an individual who 'through bashfulness, suspicion and timorousness will not be seen abroad, [he] loves darkness as life [and] he dare not come in company for fear....'¹¹ However, the validity of the agoraphobic syndrome was questioned until very recently. As late as the 1960s, clinicians argued that agoraphobic fears should be looked at as symptomatic of other disorders including depression, general anxiety, and psychosis.

In the last century, atypical behavior, particularly among women, was located on a vague, social continuum ranging from tolerated ec-

centricity to unacceptable madness. The "outstanding physiological difference" of women was believed to be the "development of a nervous system 'much more acute and more finely balanced than that of the male'."¹² Many "female complaints" were regarded as manifestations of hysteria. "In the absence of specific diagnoses for some mental illnesses, the woman was simply pronounced hysterical...." Included among these symptoms were sick headaches, asthma, paralysis, swooning, suicide, and a "great fear of going outside the home or into crowds."¹³

Although much of Dickinson's work certainly suggests her concern about her own sanity, in one of her lighter moments she demonstrates an understanding of the often arbitrary and ambiguous definitions of madness:

Much Madness is divinest Sense--
 To a discerning Eye--
 Much Sense--the starkest Madness--
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as All, prevail--
 Assent--and you are sane--
 Demur--you're straightway dangerous--
 And handled with a Chain--

(J. 435)

Two centuries earlier, in a more pietistic (though no less misogynic) New England, perhaps Dickinson's poetic expressions of her experience might have encouraged, as Allen Tate once suggested, Cotton Mather to have "burnt her for a witch."¹⁴

In the more troublesome "One Need not be a Chamber--" (J. 670), the metaphor of the poem presents anxieties which seem to be located within the unconscious. Dickinson's appropriation of the familiar Gothic castle at midnight is, at times, awkward and obvious. Certain stock characters, the diction, and the situations demand, rather than

achieve, intrigue: ghosts, spectres, and the "Midnight Meetings"; haunted chambers and houses; "the Body [that] borrows a Revolver--"; the hidden assassin; the bolted door. Her treatment of fear is exaggerated, but the effect appears to be intentionally parodic. Rather than creating an imaginable setting for the inner self, the Gothic details succeed only in affirming its inaccessibility. The attempt to describe and articulate the unconscious mind results in what seems a feeble or ridiculous imitation. The metaphors fail to articulate the expected horror of "Ourself behind ourself." Inside the "Brain" are spaces far more unimaginable than those which can be represented by "Material Places." At best the poem succeeds only in the use of a diction which intimates the extremity or superlativeness of the locality: "far surpassing," "far [less] safer," "cooler Host," "Horror's least," "superior spectre-- / Or More--."

The real horror the poem endorses is realized in the subtle execution of the tone, in the development of a sense of imminent and unavoidable violation. The situation of the poem implies violence, pursuit, and evasion: the "Abbey gallop" through corridors; the "stone a'chase"; "Ourself behind ourself, concealed"; the "Revolver"; the bolted door; the "Assassin hid in our Apartment." The construction of tension in the poem is difficult and often paradoxical. Despite its residence within the self (it seems at home in the corridors), the "interior Confronting" ghost is treated as a transgressor, an "Assassin." Furthermore, although the dreaded confrontation occupies the narrator's time, its realization seems unlikely and even impossible. "Ourself behind ourself" suggests both perpetual companionship (or pursuit) and perpetual separation (evasion).

One can only imagine the anxiety such a scenario must have represented for the agoraphobic Dickinson. No matter how skillfully she may describe her environment, she has virtually no power of description over the unconscious, a place so boundless in its paradox it cannot even be imagined. Most terrible, however, is the incessant fear of this impossible confrontation, the violation of the self by some more final, truer "Host." Although the violation feels imminent, the corridors seem interminable. One imagines pursued and pursuer, door after endless door.

Often the Dickinson poem implies that the greater the circumscription of space, the greater the possibility for familiarity and control. Her selection for the house surrogate is often extreme.

A Prison gets to be a friend--
Between it's Ponderous face
And Our's--a Kinsmanship express--
And in it's narrow Eyes--

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deals us--stated as our food--
And hungered for--the same--

We learn to know the Planks--
That answer to Our feet--
So miserable a sound--at first--
Nor even now--so sweet--

As plashing in the Pools--
When Memory was a Boy--
But a Demurer Circuit--
A Geometric Joy--

The Posture of the Key
That interrupt the Day
To Our Endeavor--Not so real
The Cheek of Liberty--

As this Phantasm Steel
Whose features--Day and Night--

[no stanza break]

Are present to us--as Our Own--
And as escapeless--quite--

The narrow Round--the Stint--
The slow exchange of Hope--
For something passiver--Content
Too steep for Looking up--

The Liberty we knew
Avoided--like a Dream--
Too wide for any Night but Heaven--
If That--indeed--redeem--

(J. 652)

The speaker identifies her world with the prison metaphor, a radical manifestation of separation and boundaries. (As we shall see, however, Dickinson capably imagines even more severe circumscriptions, much more restrictive geometries.) Paradoxically, her situation is both "prison" and "friend." In the personification of the prison, Dickinson emphasizes intimacy and identification more than restriction. The prison eventually gets to be "a friend"; in its "narrow Eyes" she recognizes a degree of "Kinsmanship." Although the prison clearly reduces the speaker's movement, the tone of the poem remains ambivalent. In addition to familiarity, a certain amount of control is realized by the confinement: the planks predictably respond to the narrator's footfalls. The predictability is reinforced in the perception of a kind of prison geometry suggested in the spatial diction: "narrow Eyes," the narrow Round," "the appointed Beams," "A Geometric Joy," the "posture of the Key," the "stint," the dream "too Wide" (emphasis added). Overall the space seems to fulfill the speaker's more modest expectations for "a Demurer Circuit."

Furthermore, there is some indication that the speaker's incarceration is unresisted if not, in fact, voluntary. Liberty is "avoided," hope is exchanged for a "passiver" condition but one in which the speaker

realizes contentment. All images and suggestions in the poem of worlds external to the prison space can be represented only by illusions of reality: the memory of childhood ("When Memory was a Boy"), the dream of Liberty, and the "phantasm Steel" (the key) on the other side of the door. Although the speaker's world is radically confining (a "narrow Round"), her contentment--"Too steep for looking up"--seems limitless, extending dizzily above and beyond her.

The circumscription of space, manifested often in the poems about familiarity and control, is, however, antithetical to the constituent agoraphobic demand for freedom of movement. Much of Dickinson's work, particularly the poems which concern nature and natural activities, imagines a kind of lazy meandering: the butterfly emerging on a summer's afternoon, its flight "Without Design" (J. 354); the meadow bee that rides "indefinite" "upon a raft of Air" (J. 661); the bird that "Soars--and shifts--and whirls," afloat upon "The General Heavens." Often these poems are peopled with vagabonds or travelers: the "South Wind" who hints about "Ports and Peoples" (J. 719) or simply the wind whom the narrator calls her "Rapid--footless Guest" (J. 818). Superlatives in her poems are explained and understood in relation to distant places and people: "Odors from St. Domingo" (J. 137), "Purple--from Peru" (J. 247), "the splendor of a Burmah" (J. 1466), and the mail that comes all the way from "Tunis" (J. 1463). These poems clearly demonstrate a desire not only for movement but for exploration and purposeless adventure. They suggest that Dickinson perhaps imagined a resolution of her dilemma: freedom to move without anxiety, without the constraints that predictability necessarily imposes upon one's life.

"My Cocoon tightens--" (J. 1099) concerns not the casual adventure but rather the serious business of self-evolvement, which Dickinson will identify as a kind of metamorphosis. An accomplished backyard naturalist, Dickinson recognized and often exploited the rich metaphoric possibilities of birds, insects, flowers, and their various activities. In this small nature-drama, the poet demonstrates her ability to slow down a natural activity, to secure and to amplify the small, often indiscernible moment, and to extract from it some essential metaphoric significance. The poet has captured the attendant mood of parturition using the cocoon, an enclosure associated with a life form most significant for its intermediacy:

My Cocoon tightens--Colors tease--
 I'm reeling for the Air--
 A dim capacity for Wings
 Demeans the Dress I wear--

A power of Butterfly must be--
 The Aptitude to fly
 Meadows of Majesty concedes
 And easy Sweeps of Sky--

So I must baffle at the Hint
 And cipher at the sign
 And make much blunder, if at last
 I take the clue divine--

(J. 1099)

The cocoon represents a place for a kind of lingering or hesitation, a doorway perhaps between potentiality and actuality. Life and the actualization of the self, the diction of the poem suggests, involve chance, uncertainty, and mysteriousness. The emerging speaker/butterfly "must baffle at the Hint / And cipher at the Sign." Her metamorphosis will result in the realization of an expansiveness and sovereignty. The "power of Butterfly" will be considerable: the ability to fly in-

plies "Meadows of Majesty" and "Easy Sweeps of Sky." For her metamorphosis to succeed, however, the speaker must first take the "clue divine." Symbolically, self-liberation will be carried out on wings, celebrated and identified by color (the "Colors tease"). The contrast between the two stages of life is striking: the wings "demean" the gray chrysalis, the "dress" of the cocoon. Unlike the poems mentioned earlier which focus upon the freedom of movement, "My Cocoon" concentrates upon the embryonic butterfly/self during a moment when confinement seems no longer bearable. Chafing against its cocoon, the developing butterfly is teased by its own possibility for flight.

Despite her celebration of flight, Dickinson recognizes the inevitable temporality of freedom. In "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly" (J. 354), another small lepidopteran drama, the breaking of boundaries is metaphorized, once again, as a kind of casual exploration. Dickinson identifies the butterfly emerging from the cocoon with a "Lady [emerging] from her Door" on a summer afternoon. The tone is initially bright and lambent: the volant butterfly/woman goes forth, contracting her wings (her "pretty Parasol"). Going "Nowhere," she seems to flicker over the surface of the afternoon, executing her "Miscellaneous Enterprise" apparently "Without Design."

In the middle of the poem, however, an opposing reality, one that is heavier, more serious, and darker, challenges the idyll:

Her pretty Parasol be seen
Contracting in a Field
Where Men made Hay--
Then struggling hard
With an opposing Cloud--

The new activity emphasizes a sense of opposition. The men are positioned opposite the butterfly: they toil in the field above which she casually

sports. The workers serve as a successful contrast to the butterfly. They are serious, industrious, earth-bound; she is frivolous and ethereal. She seems compatible with her situation, the "Summer Afternoon"; they, running out of time, must contend with their environment. Stylistically, the interruption of the "plot" caused by the introduction of this second, opposing reality rescues the poem almost certainly from the monotony the butterfly's meandering would inevitably create.

More important, the incident of the workers portends a change in tone fully realized in the final stanza as the butterfly's disdain for the men toiling in the field is corrected:

Till Sundown crept--a steady Tide--
And Men that made the Hay--
And Afternoon--and Butterfly--
Extinguished--in the Sea--

The inundation that ultimately destroys the idyll is more indiscrete than the storm which never occurs. Both butterfly and men are consumed by an undifferentiated sea of darkness. In this poem, as in many of Dickinson's, the sunset metaphorically suggests the dissolution of boundaries and distinct entities: "Men" and "Afternoon" and "Butterfly" are overwhelmed ("Extinguished") by the darkness. The activities both of men and the butterfly are lost; toil and idyll come equally to naught. Although her wings did seem to allow the butterfly a certain advantage, the freedom and expansion are only temporary. Against the particular inundation of the darkness, her "pretty Parasol" affords no security.

In another poem, Dickinson will metaphorically suggest that expansion and confinement are both dreadful, each in its own specific way. Once again, Dickinson is concerned with escape:

The Soul has Bandaged moments--
 When too appalled to stir--
 She feels some ghastly Fright come up
 And stop to look at her--

Salute her--with long fingers--
 Caress her freezing hair--
 Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
 The Lover--hovered--o'er--
 Unworthy, that a thought so mean
 Accost a Theme--so--fair--

The soul has moments of Escape--
 When bursting all the doors--
 She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
 And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee--delirious borne--
 Long Dungeoned from his Rose--
 Touch Liberty--then know no more,
 But Noon, and Paradise--

The Soul's retaken moments--
 When, Felon led along,
 With shackles on the plumed feet,
 And staples, in the Song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,
 These, are not brayed of Tongue--

(J. 512)

I cannot agree with the small number of biographers and critics who believe this poem records Dickinson's own psychotic episode. Cody, the most confident of these readers, believes the poem is a symbolic narrative of Dickinson's "ego breakdown." Certainly, as he has pointed out, "the clarity with which Emily Dickinson perceived and recorded changes in herself seems almost miraculous."¹⁵ His argument for the poet's psychosis is, however, faulty, developed largely from his own observations that insanity does not prevent the "'insane' [from being] intelligent, warm, suffering, introspective, [and even] creative."¹⁶ All these characteristics he presumably attributes to Dickinson. Cody correctly recognizes the evidence of a progressively agoraphobic be-

havior in Dickinson. Using several biographical examples, each indicative of Dickinson's phobia (many of them discussed in this work), he concludes: "In face of these vignettes of an advancing agoraphobia, it is difficult to see how anyone can maintain that Emily Dickinson's retreat into isolation was void of neuroticism."¹⁷ Cody is mistaken neither in his observations of Dickinson's agoraphobia nor in the suggestion that such behavior is neurotic. He errs instead in presuming that neuroticism is necessarily a precursor or symptom of psychosis. Furthermore, the transition from neurotic to psychotic behavior is never made clear in Cody's biography of Dickinson. His argument for Dickinson's agoraphobia, based on biographical detail, is strong; his evidence for Dickinson's psychotic breakdown must be considered speculative at best.

The letters dating from 1862, the year "The Soul has Bandaged moments--" was probably written, certainly reflect some personal crisis in the poet's life. We notice in these letters Dickinson's concern because "the World is not the shape it was."¹⁸ "It is easier," she writes to Samuel Bowles, "to look behind at pain, than to see it coming";¹⁹ "the old words," she fears, "are numb."²⁰ In the same year she writes to Higginson of the now famous "terror--since September--."²¹ There is no evidence that allows more than speculation about this "terror." It has been variously linked to a romantic disappointment, an eye disorder, and of course a psychotic episode. What the poems and letters of this period do with certainty speak about is fear and anxiety. In the commentary accompanying the Johnson edition of the letters, the editor concludes that Dickinson at this time "was undergoing an emotional disturbance of such magnitude that she feared for her reason."²²

Although Cody convincingly demonstrates Dickinson's isolation and her metaphorical treatment of anxiety (which he naturally labels "Freudian anxiety"), his work is, I believe, directed and stunted seriously by preconceptions. (So eloquent, at times, is much of Cody's analysis and yet so often marred are his conclusions that one sometimes wishes his work lacked a thesis.) A more cautious psychoanalytic reading of the poem is made by Robert Weisbuch. Weisbuch is thoughtful and yet reasonably careful in his generalizations about the poem, noting only "the pressure of experience behind [the poem's] gothic psychology...."²³ Rather than offering a "particularity of situation," Weisbuch offers a cautious consideration of the poem's metaphoric situation:

The soul [in the poem] is an injured paralytic, a frozen flower, a fair theme in ruin. The 'fright' is a monster, a goblin, an icy replacement of the bee-lover, a mean and demeaning thought. Dickinson casts about furiously to describe the horror of these moments, not their causes.... [In the third stanza], the Soul "bursts," like "Christ's personal expanse," from a tomb--from the dungeon of fright if we wish to stress the poem's narrative progress, but more generally from the limitations of life's body....

[In the final stanza], the second dungeon--and it is only now that the jail images of the earlier stanzas gain full expression--is darker than the first because the "retaken" soul now recognizes its possibilities, its lost freedom and power. It knows of its "plumed feet" and triumphant "song," and its knowledge is what makes particularly intolerable the "shackles" and "staples" of experience...

This is the payoff of the poem's odd mixture of exposition and narrative sequence: though the soul may escape again and again, by the end of the poem we know that it always will be recaptured, that interment is its regular condition.²⁴

Weisbuch believes the poem suggests both "anxiety and subsequent anger at God."²⁵ I question the identification of a Christian metaphor in the poem. Dickinson frequently uses her Calvinistic vocabulary metaphorically; less often does she use other vocabularies (the

domestic, the garden, the Gothic) to discuss genuinely religious concerns. (As one reader has noted, Emily Dickinson "used the Christian metaphor far more than she let it use her."²⁶) Weisbuch may have based this point of his argument on the poet's use of the word "soul," a word she uses frequently and variously throughout her work. The "soul" in this poem seems to suggest some essential identification of self, a common employment of the word by Dickinson.

Nonetheless, I find Weisbuch's detection of a cycle of captivity and release a useful access into the poem. The situation begins in medias res: "Bandaged moments" encourages us to assume some important, albeit unidentified, preliminary catastrophe. The use of assumption is almost emblematic of Dickinson's rhetoric. In the previous chapter I discussed "The First Day's Night had come--," a poem whose similar rhetoric establishes an extremely pervasive and yet unidentified cycle of experience. The soul's bow, "blown to Atoms," prevents the narrator from completing her song. Mending the soul provides her with each day's work until the "Horror" reappears and the cycle presumably continues.

"The Soul has Bandaged moments--" expresses, perhaps, the agoraphobic Dickinson's dread of both confinement and freedom. In the poem's dichotomy, these anxieties are given a kind of articulation; the poet may even be attempting to metaphorize the panic experience. For the agoraphobic, the fear of confinement (and perhaps the fear of freedom as well) is the fear of being overwhelmed. Our narrator, wrapped in her bandages (bandages that result from those radical "moments of "Escape"), "feels some ghastly Fright come up." "[T]oo appalled to stir," she is easily victimized, or overwhelmed, by the "goblin." The fear of mobility for the agoraphobic is, of course, the fear of

transgressing familiar boundaries and encountering unlimited spaces, or chaos. As one agoraphobic expressed this fear, "finding [the] wall was the key to the whole lot."²⁷ Dickinson metaphorizes this experience as the soul's "moments of Escape," resulting in a kind of explosion. Paralysis and disintegration seem to define the two vertices of the experience. In both phases, the integrity of the self (the "soul") feels threatened. Tension in the poem results from the flux of the opposing, yet equally overwhelming, positions. More specifically, these positions represent contrasts between inertia and momentum (explosion), between the complete passivity of the subject (death) and her own unlimited aggression (madness). The subject, faced with this irresolvable dilemma, feels she can neither advance nor retreat.

Most interesting of the poem's dichotomies is the victim/felon contradiction of the subject herself. At first the helpless subject feels threatened by the "ghastly fright" that "comes up" and "caresses" her. (The agoraphobic will often complain, we will recall, of having been "taken over by some stronger force."²⁸) The subject imagines herself pinned down, paralyzed, by the profane "caress." The goblin, a dark parody of the lover/bee, proceeds to

Salute her--with long fingers--
Caress her freezing hair--

The penetration of the soul, the implied flower of the poem, is executed not by the lover / bee but by the ghastly goblin:

Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover--hovered--o'er--

The poet regards the invasion seriously: the metaphor strongly suggests a rape. The violation is rendered more horrific by the dis-

closure that the rapist is Death himself. He caresses her "freezing hair" with his "long fingers." The desecration of the kiss is almost unthinkable:

Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme--so fair--

The tone of the third stanza changes dramatically. The soul is no longer the passive receptacle of the external agent. She "swings" and "dances," "bursting doors"; she is "delirious borne." If the first scenario suggests the "soul" under the control of another, then the following scene suggests a "soul" out of control. The apprehension the phobic Dickinson seems to express is of unrestrained movement which, paradoxically, results in a fate similar to the death-like paralysis: the integrity of the soul is once again threatened but this time by a kind of madness or mania. Total freedom, the soul's "moment of Escape," is accomplished only through an aggressive, specifically violent, action. The moment results in the disruption of the soul's own boundaries: "bursting all the doors," the soul "dances like a Bomb, abroad." The line is almost oxymoronic. Reflecting the paradoxes of the subject's situation, the "dance," which is by definition orderly and precise, is like the "Bomb," the very symbol of violence and the illimitable confusion that results from such disorder.

The final lines of the poem resume the cycle of confinement and freedom, the metaphoric death and madness the panicky subject imagines. Once again she experiences feelings of confinement and passivity. "Retaken," the "Felon" is "led along." Dickinson apparently recognizes a relationship between the two stages: the "bandages" no longer restrict her, but her "plumed feet" now wear "shackles." Returned to a

similar situation, she discovers that the "Horror welcomes her, again."

Dickinson recreates the macabre locality of "The Soul has Banded moments--" in many of her poems. Her morbidity has been well established. Her reputation is based on the six hundred or more poems (more than a third of the canon) which directly or indirectly discuss death. Indeed, many of the most often anthologized poems concern dying: "It was not Death" (J. 510), "I heard a Fly--buzz" (J. 465), and "Because I could not stop for Death--" (J. 712). Her obsession with dying, however, may indicate a poetic practicality. Dying affords Dickinson a useful trope for her interest in and discussion of spaces and boundaries. Her interest is less in death than in death's phenomenology, in the possible awareness of passing through or transcending boundaries at the moment of death. I also believe, as I will show in the final chapter of this work, that the moment provides Dickinson a much needed trope to carry and to explain the sensation of indefiniteness and the breakdown of normal perceptual boundaries associated with extreme states of anxiety (depersonalization and derealization).

Dickinson, in her search for a metaphor which might express her experiences, frequently places her narrator in the province of death and dying. Often she will find herself at the border, or doorway, between life and death. She will describe dying as the ambiguous "Kind behind a Door" (J. 335); and life will end, she tells us, when death "gains the Door" (J. 390). At the perimeter of the "Open Tomb," one might experience a clarity never before imagined. For Dickinson, the metaphorical possibilities of this superior perspective are considerable:

The admirations--and Contempts--or time--
 Show justest--through an Open Tomb--
 The Dying--as it were a Hight--
 Reorganizes Estimate
 And what We saw not
 We distinguish clear--
 And mostly--see not
 What We saw before--

'Tis Compound Vision--
 Light--enabling Light--
 The Finite--furnished
 With the Infinite--
 Convex--and Concave Witness--
 Back toward Time--
 And forward--
 Toward the God of Him--

(J. 906)

Profound in the vision it professes to carry, the poem is, ironically, intensely unadorned. The images--if they can be called images-- are stark, indefinite, or simply ambiguous: "Convex--and Concave Witness," "Light--enabling Light--," and "what We saw not--." The most impressive movement of the poem seems predicated upon the adverbs and preposition at the end of the poem: "Back--toward Time-- / And forward--Toward the God of Him--." Nevertheless, the poem is a striking execution of Dickinson's craft. Stripping language of all but its most essential powers, the poet creates almost pure rhetoric. And yet, the truncated syntax and hard, abstract scenery resonate with the semblance of revelation. Defiant, almost reckless in its structural disregards, the poem represents Dickinson's purest style. "The admirations--" demonstrates language carried to the edge of unintelligibility, and yet, it strikes us as the fitting vehicle for some important thing well said.

Equally puzzling is the poem's theme. David Porter has suggested "its subject could well have been the science of optics."²⁹ Certainly

no other of Dickinson's poems seems so occupied with the business of perspective, what Dickinson calls her "Compound Vision." Literally speaking, the situation of the poem seems to be neither life nor death but instead the "Hight" separating the two. The narrator, balanced between "what was and what is to be, the finite and the infinite, time and timelessness," finds the view the "justest."³⁰ As often is the case in a Dickinson poem, the doorway suggests the recognition of dichotomies: "admiration and contempt," the "invisible"/the "clear," "back" and "forward," "time" and "God" (timelessness). In fact, the doorway of the tomb affords the speaker multiple and simultaneous points of view. Opposite influences are regarded as complementary rather than contradictory: "Convex--and Concave Witness." In another poem, she will identify dying as the "Earthen Door" beyond which "the Panels are reversed" (J. 920), mirror-like images of each other.

Dickinson's affinity for doors and doorways (and windows) is not limited to her poems about death. The metamorphosis of the butterfly, we might remember, is described as the "Lady from her Door." We are told in another poem Fate follows us through a door and then "behind us bolts it" (J. 1523). Eden is an "old-fashioned House" whose door "We suantered from" (J. 1657). The precincts of dreams and wakefulness are separated by the "Purple Door" (J. 1376). From the metaphoric doorway one can see both sides, both the bound and the boundless. It is a place of importance, a place for decision or transition. From this pivotal location one can maintain a better perspective. (Critics have only recently begun to look at the relationship between doorways and perspective in the poems. "Door," in fact, is not even included in the subject index of the Johnson edition.)

Dickinson seems to have associated this superior vision intimately with the poetic imagination. Certainly she regarded her own poetic sensibility as an advantage. Poetry, her own implied house, is a world of "Possibility"; it is a "fairer" and "superior" house because of its numerous doors and windows. Furthermore, she may have felt her uncommon perspective was related to, even responsible for, her need for isolation. In both her life and her poetry, Dickinson seems to have held disdain for the "House of Prose," the world in which perspective is a matter of habit, often formed consensually. Dickinson often affords this other "House," the popular and prosaic world, only a peripheral recognition:

The Soul selects her own Society--
 Then--shuts the Door--
 To her divine Majority--
 Present no more--

(J. 303)

With a resounding negation, she closes "the Valves of her attention-- / Like Stone--." Her own "society" provides both security (isolation) and transcendence (imagination). One critic suggests

Dickinson often imbues her poetic enterprise with a vision of language operating as a defense against the pressure of rejection and exile that define her world. Here is a definition of poetry that possesses the capacity to mold the terms of existence within the fires of her own imagination.³¹

Several of Dickinson's poems about space do, indeed, suggest that the poet regarded the imagination as a kind of superior yet constantly threatened house. One senses in these poems an alienation which the speaker attributes to her ability to regard experiences in uncommon, often metaphorical ways. "They called me to the Window" (J. 628) uses

a window metaphor to demonstrate the superior viewpoint that the imagination allows as well as the isolation the position will inevitably demand:

They called me to the Window, for
 "'Twas Sunset"--Some one Said--
 I only saw a Sapphire Farm--
 And just a Single Herd--

Of Opal Cattle--feeding far
 Upon so vain a Hill--
 As even while I looked--dissolved--
 Nor Cattle were--nor Soil--

But in their Room--a Sea--displayed--
 And Ships--of such a size--
 As Crews of Mountains--could afford--
 And Decks--to seat the skies--

This--too--the Showman rubbed away--
 And when I looked again--
 Nor Farm--nor Opal Herd was there--
 Nor Mediterranean--

(J. 628)

The situation of the poem, a sunset, is one of the poet's favorites. Like her doorway, the sunset suggests a transitional setting, or moment. Readers have long noticed Dickinson's "predilection for fading contours" and "unstable phenomena in nature" of all kinds.³² David Porter associates the poet's "cherished subject of sunset turning to night" with the general precariousness of perspective.³³ Dickinson's metaphorical sunset directly concerns the poet's interest in spaces and boundaries.

"They called me to the Window" represents two different points of view, two unlike responses to the phenomenon of the sunset. One response simply identifies or names the phenomenon occurring beyond the window. The other response, with its offer of multiple images, implies altogether the inconsistency of identification. "They"

are formulators of the perhaps more prosaic or public point of view. Their pronouncement is delivered by an anonymous, yet presumably representative, voice: "Some one Said." The narrator offers a much less absolute and more fantastic evaluation. In a modest, almost bashful voice, she undervalues her own observation: "I only saw a Sapphire Farm." The voice is, of course, ironic. Both her observation and her articulation impress us with their uncommonness. Unlike her companions', her expression is distinguished by fancy and unrestrained imagination.

She accomplishes her presentation using a diction that allows the unlikely coexistence of two dissimilar, if not incongruous, clusters of properties. The sapphire, for instance, suggests the exotic, the unfamiliar or foreign, while the farm suggests familiarity (domesticity) and mundaneness. Nonetheless, the relationship seems secure, easeful: the same blue-green color might be associated with both words. The propriety of the description is reinforced in the alliteration of the two syllables "-phire" and "farm." These syllables are, of course, further suggestive of the phenomenon itself: the blaze of the rural evening sun. It will be the poet's additional task to demonstrate both the phenomenon itself and the narrator's expansive, unrestricted vision. Although "They" name the phenomenon, our narrator carefully avoids definiteness in her observations. Instead, she will continually make us aware of the possibilities of the imagination and of the importance of point of view in our perceptions. In The Landscape of Absence, Inder Nath Kher thoughtfully summarizes Dickinson's objective in this poem:

Perception seems to have transcended perception. The whole scene suggests a cyclic pattern of life and death, and also the ultimate freedom from the cycle [in the ensuing darkness].

Apart from that, the role of perception as both creator and destroyer comes to light. The metaphors of sunset, sapphire farm, soil, sea, ships, skies, and showman are also the several relations of the 'I' of the poem. The fundamental feature of these forms is their presence in the creative imagination of the poet, and not so much in the sphere of ordinary [prosaic] observations....³⁴

The observation made from the poet's eye is expressed as a continuum (if not, as Kher maintains, a cycle) of change. Using the process of continual image-making, the poet captures the essence of sunset. Interesting is the poet/narrator's implied admission of both the distortion and ambiguity of her poem/observation. We do not know, for instance, whether the scene actually includes a herd of cattle which, in the diminishing light, appears "opal" or if the "herd" is suggested in configurations of clouds, sky, and setting sun. The "vain" hill perhaps implies the futility of assigning labels to the constantly changing landscape. Flux is as essential to the phenomenon as the sun or the colors or the ambiguities.

As the sunset continues, the narrator instructs us with her sense of unrestricted possibility. The experience of the sunset is expansive, rapidly panoramic. As an audience to the narrator's vision, we are allowed little opportunity to concentrate upon a single image for very long. The stanza breaks, typical of Dickinson's style, do not encourage delay or scrutiny. The "Single Herd" with which the first stanza ends is quickly transformed into the more complex and more interesting "Opal Cattle," the temporary concern of the second stanza. Most interesting in this stanza, however, is the speaker herself: "As even while I looked [the hill] dissolved--." As if to frustrate the audience's complacency, its tendency toward assuredness

and summation, the speaker herself, the observing speaker, becomes a part of the image the reader receives and, therefore, part of the reader's experience of the phenomenon.

Initially, I believe, we choose to share (or wish to share) the speaker's viewpoint. We are encouraged, in a sense, to champion her position against the stolid "They" whose prosaic pronouncement of "sunset" offers us little. We like the ambiguous "They" represent, however, a different point of view. (Thanks to the poet, our vision is less methodic than theirs.) The variability of the experience is not only by the unconstant phenomenon but by the act of observing itself. We begin to sense the motion of things passing and changing has become more important than their weight. If we are to appreciate fully the experience, we must accept, as the observer/narrator has accepted, surfaces which have no pretense to stability or depth.

Ironically, the observation becomes increasingly more intricate as actual darkness obscures the scene. The rendition cannot anchor itself in any kind of permanent reality and concedes to fantasy. Threatened by darkness, the observation is rescued, at least temporarily, by a transcendent imagination. Before dissolving into night, the simple farm becomes the "Mediterranean"; the "Single Herd" of cattle becomes "Crews of Mountains."

Channeled through the imagination, the observation is, of course, in danger of sailing away. Like the phenomenon itself, the vision expands indefinitely. The observation, however, is eventually devitalized, or diluted, by the process. As the vision spins into infinitude (darkness), the gap between reality (consensual reality) and the freely expanding imagination widens and occludes expression. At some point

the imaginings will become so distant and obscure they will disappear: they will be "rubbed away." As another Dickinson adventurer has told us, to hazard unlimited expansion is, paradoxically, "to dance, like a Bomb, abroad." Whether in the symbolic expression of sunsets or butterflies, transcendence of boundaries results not only in discovery and creation but also, perhaps, in the destruction of the bound entity.

The paradox offered by freedom may well have been as critical for Dickinson the poet as for Dickinson the recluse. In her inability (or unwillingness) to "discipline" her verse, she recognized, I believe, the inevitable oblivion to which her poetry seemed destined. In an apparent response to her friend Higginson's criticism of poems she had sent him, Dickinson writes: "You think my gait 'spasmodic'--I am in danger--Sir-- You think me 'uncontrolled'--I have no Tribunal."³⁵ Indeed, in the most obscure and inaccessible of her poems, one often senses a language gone too far. In this respect, perhaps Dickinson is not unlike her imaginative but anarchic narrator. Both push language to the limits (and sometimes over) of expressiveness. For both the result includes a kind of alienation. Initially, our speaker is involved, albeit only peripherally, with a community ("They" who have summoned her to the window). Ultimately, however, she is left with no community. Standing at the darkened window, the narrator seems to be staring into the vast and empty night. Ironically, the surface panorama of faraway places is concluded in the deep of an exhaustive darkness.

Dickinson understood that the boundary between art and chaos is difficult to maintain. Often in the fiction of her poems, the border is visible only to the artist himself:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
 In unperceived Hands--
 And dancing softly to Himself
 His Yarn of Pearl--unwinds

He plies from Nought to Nought--
 In unsubstantial Trade--
 Supplants our Tapestries with His--
 In half the period--

An Hour to rear supreme
 His Continents of Light--
 Then dangles from the Housewife's Broom--
 His Boundaries--forgot--

(J. 605)

Although he appears infrequently in Dickinson's work, the spider in one of the most unvarying symbols in the poet's menagerie. For Dickinson, the spider/artisan exemplifies the essence of the poetic spirit. Kher has suggested that the poet "regards the spider as the neglected son of genius, an artist who weaves his net from within."³⁶ In Dickinson's view the spider/artisan involved in his trade represents the antithesis of society. His creation begins within himself, in the "Silver Ball" held in his "unperceived Hands." Self-preoccupied, unobtrusive, and segregated in his happy work, he "danc[es] softly to Himself."

His "Trade" strikes us and the narrator as unintelligible, perhaps as pure chicanery. With no perceptual points of connection, the web seems spun from "Nought to Nought." His work, however, results in the tapestry, a fabric of complicated yet integrated designs. We are told of the specialness of his trade; it "supplants our Tapestries." Minimal and almost abstract, the web's structure (its geometry), nonetheless, capably expresses whole "Continents of Light." Indeed, the structure seems more the embracement than the entrapment of light. It is nearly ethereal and sublime.

The sublime piece of work, however, faces a serious danger. Paradoxically, the structure (the web or outline of the tapestry) facilitates the destruction of the tapestry. Once again, we encounter conflicting viewpoints. The prosaic housewife poses a threat. And yet she seems more stolid than culpable, more unaware than deliberate. The concretization of the design has also served to publicize it. It is the "boundaries" of the spider's tapestry which dangle from the broom, not the "Continents of Light." It is the "boundaries," the poet tells us, which are easily "forgot." The confrontation between the ethereal, free-moving spider and the heavy domesticity of the housewife seems entirely predictable.

A second version of the poem encourages a more symbolic reading. Two important changes in diction were considered. "Continents" and "boundaries" were selected over "theories" and "sophistries," respectively. The two dictions offer different clusters of properties. The alternative diction suggests the subject of systems, or theories, while theoretical properties associated with the accepted selection are released only within the specific context of the poem. We do not know, of course, the reason for the choices; the elliptic Dickinson may have found both "theories" and "sophistries" obvious, particularly in a poem which advances, I believe, the value of subtlety in art. The symbolic properties of the words seem more appropriate as the subject of art and its creation unfolds. The common characteristic shared by "continents" and the discarded "theories"--the characteristic Dickinson was perhaps hoping to release in her poem--may be the implication of interrelatedness, of structure or geometry. More difficult to ascertain is the connection between "sophistries" and "boundaries." It may be

a sense of subtleness or the imperceptibility of structure which attracted Dickinson to both words. A boundary seems less obtrusive than, for example, a barrier, and sophistry implies structures or plans which, by definition, should be subtle.

Perhaps Dickinson offers in "The Spider holds a Silver Ball" her own typically terse and oblique statement about her art. Nearly translucent, the web involves, nonetheless, complexities and intrastuctures. "Tapestry" implies design and, of course, art and beauty. The spider's art (his "trade") results in a superior work, a tapestry which "supplants our Tapestries." His creation seems less ponderous and more subtle in its execution, realizing the containment of light, whole "Continents of Light." However, it is the nature of the light on the web to avoid entrapment; in a sense, the web offers itself to its medium. Compared to "our" heavy tapestries, the spider's trade is a work of light. Possibly this most prolific of writers, leaving no formal poetics, may have included some of her theories within the texts of her poems. (An exhaustive analysis of the several poems which concern arts and crafts and their creators seems to be in order. To my knowledge, this work is yet to be done.)

As I have suggested, Dickinson's search for a containment which does not entrap is both an artistic and personal objective. We encounter in her poetry a constant reevaluation of and experiment with spaces and boundaries. These obsessive occupations may have been determined by her phobic demands for control (or predictability and familiarity) and for freedom of movement. For the agoraphobic Dickinson, this freedom of movement is only a symbolic freedom, almost exclusively allowed in her writing and imagination. As such, the freedom includes not only

the freedom to move away from, or to avoid, but also the freedom to explore and to set up new boundaries. The phobic demands for control and freedom of movement, however, may be intrinsically contradictory. Fulfillment of one goal renders the second unobtainable. Typical of the agoraphobic, Dickinson fails to maintain in her life a balance between the two demands and decides in favor of an uncomfortable domesticity. The house (or the house-surrogate) provides control: the predictability of the planks that "answer to our feet," the security of "the appointed Beam." The prison is not, in fact, so bad, suggesting a kind of "Kinsmanship." Certainly the reduction of space limits the freedom of the captive "feilon." In her most extreme conscriptions, however, she is victim and paralytic. Dickinson constantly seeks out boundaries in her work and experiments with thoughts of freedom (and its possible and terrible consequences). Often she courageously explores these anxieties in metaphor. Dickinson seems convinced of the inaccessibility of these anxieties to prose. Even in those rare letters in which she seems to discuss her phobia, she uses metaphor: "The gone-to-Kansas-feeling" or the "Phantom" who follows her to church one day. The letters as well as the poems suggest her ambivalence: the fearful experiences seem, in some ways, exciting and expansive. The metaphoric representation allows, possibly, a confrontation (albeit only metaphoric) with unlimited spaces which is not possible in any other way. Control, realized only in the "narrow Round" of her prison, costs her exactly her freedom. On the other hand, to "dance like a Bomb, abroad" might result, she fears, in a total loss of her coveted control. Dickinson's personal and artistic objectives complement each other, perhaps become one and the same.

"Four Trees upon a solitary Acre" (J. 742) demonstrates, I believe, both the personal and artistic obsessions with space and boundaries in Dickinson's poetry. However, it has received little attention until recently. Although many critics now acknowledge it as "one of Dickinson's most haunting and most undervalued lyrics,"³⁷ few other of her poems have been so basically and so grossly misunderstood. In his brief discussion of this poem, David Porter calls it a "bitter parable" and identifies in it a "darkness" which he insists is common to Dickinson's vision.³⁸ Typical of many of the critics interested in "Four Trees," Porter uncovers evidence of Dickinson's theological and ontological skepticism. Though the poem offers only the most unexceptional references to God, these readers identify a skepticism which resulted after Dickinson's "systems of belief [had] failed her."³⁹ Joanne Feit Diehl insists the poem's "obscure" and allegedly "evasive" ending reflects an indecision about "the presence of a Divine or human observer who would imbue with meaning the bare landscape-vision."⁴⁰ Most recently this line of argument has been furthered by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. Wolff is even more adamant than Diehl and Porter in her insistence upon the poem's chaotic vision and dark tone:

Nothing connects. The poem may seem at first another sparse and supple still life. Yet it is radically different from other such poems.... [No] thread of community holds the contents of this work together--nothing but happenstance seems to justify their inclusion in the same piece of verse.⁴¹

Like Porter and Diehl, Wolff associates the poem's "chaos" with the disappearance of a reliable God-structure in Dickinson's culture:

The theocentric culture in which Dickinson had been reared stipulated that there was a Force behind the veil of appearance giving order and meaning to the world. Although the poet

had started in rebellion against this coercive Power and Its mandatory meaning, the structure that could be accepted as a "given" nonetheless provided an armature for art: there was an intrinsically coherent system to correct, and the artist was not constrained to begin *ex nihilo*. Yet as God's power diminished and died, intrinsic order died with it. In "Four Trees--upon a solitary Acre--," the acre and all the elements upon it stand in a perpetual state of existential isolation.⁴²

I disagree with this general conclusion about the poem's "issue of belief."⁴³ Certainly the "theocentric culture" of which Dickinson was a member was weakening (and had died in many places beyond Amherst). In many of the poems, faith clearly concerns the poet: "I prayed, at first, a little Girl" (J. 576), "It's easy to invent a Life--" (J. 724), "The abdication of Belief" (J. 1551), "Of Course--I prayed" (J. 376). However, I can find no evidence in "Four Trees" or in the arguments of these critics which substantiates a theological, or even an existential, reading. Furthermore, I do not detect a tone of "absolute bleakness"⁴⁴ in the poem. Far from reflecting chaos, the poem demonstrates a yearning to recognize or a decision to create order amidst disorder. Upon the open space, the poem uncovers, or imposes, geometrical stability. Far from bleak, the poem offers, I believe, joy, even a restrained and modest celebration.

Of all of Dickinson's poems, "Four Trees" most nearly expresses the importance and the power of the imagination in the operation of perspective. The poem suggest that randomness is merely a point of view (or the lack of one). Any environment seems chaotic until its surface is geometrized and until its various points are made responsive to one another. Although the poem moves beyond the windows and doors of Dickinson's life, the "Four Trees" manage to impose "upon [the]

solitary Acre" a sense of home, a kind of domesticity:

Four Trees--upon a solitary Acre--
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action--
Maintain--

The Sun--upon a Morning meets them--
The Wind--
No nearer Neighbor--have they--
But God--

The Acre gives them--Place--
They--Him--Attention of Passer by--
Or Shadow or of Squirrel, haply--
Or Boy--

What deed is Their's unto the General Nature--
What Plan
They severally--retard--or further--
Unknown--

(J. 742)

Although "happenstance" may be the only explanation for the poem's aggregation of principals (the four trees, the sun, the squirrel, the boy), their relationships describe and define a unique scene--the "solitary Acre." The solitariness of the acre implies, of course, isolation. It is not, however, a kind of isolation that suggests alienation or even loneliness. Instead, "solitary" will suggest both the definition of the acre (in terms of its points, or principals, and their relationships) and its sovereignty (its separateness from all other tangential acres). The trees keep ("maintain") the acre (in a second version, Dickinson considered "do reign" in place of the unusual, rebellious transitive verb, "maintain").

Far from suggesting isolation, the poem creates a community of giving and sharing. The acre gives the trees a "Place"; they, in turn, provide the acre with the possibility of strengthening its community, a reason for passerby, or squirrel, or boy. The scene, free of con-

fining walls and ceilings and doors, seems, nonetheless, secure. Furthermore the "Attention" paid the Acre suggests a kind of recognition: it confers identity upon the space. The visits are also necessary because they tell us of other places. Their initial foreignness distinguishes them and, therefore, distinguishes the domesticity of the acre. The trees also seem to locate the acre in time, recording both the cycle of days (the sun in the morning) and natural phenomenon (the "Wind," the "shadows").

Rather than a "profound uneasiness" many readers detect in this poem,⁴⁵ I find, if not joy, then contentment. Although the poem's details are sparse, the description does not feel incomplete or discontinuous. Dark imagery is nearly absent from the poem; the shadows seem only to serve the definition of the wind and the sun. Both boy and squirrel, of course, seem harmless. Their playfulness is reinforced by the sporting of sun and shadow. An atmosphere of childhood and spontaneity permeates the poem's images.

The final stanza acknowledges the poem's small vision. The architecture superimposed upon the scene serves neither large nor existential aims. "What Deed is theirs unto the General Nature / What Plan," is "unknown." The question of whether the relationships established within the acre are part of a larger geometry is not answered. It cannot be known, we are told, if they "retard--or further--" any "General Nature." Although I would agree the poem evolves from "a confrontation with incoherence"⁴⁶ (perhaps caused by Dickinson's phobic perspective), it does not yield to incoherence. In a small way, the poem celebrates a victory over chaos.

"Four Trees" is unusual among Dickinson's poems in its attempt to make places beyond windows and doors familiar. Unlike some of the

other poems in which the narrator ventures beyond the home-space. "Four trees" suggests nothing of the exotic, the foreign, the faraway place. The discovery of the homebound Dickinson domesticating, or at least geometrizing, open spaces should not surprise us. Her reluctance, however, to include herself or her narrator in the scene is puzzling. The narration is unobtrusive and ostensibly objective. The voice does not seem to originate from a specific position within the poem. The narrator merely reports the scene. This is, however, deceptive reporting. Although perhaps absent from the scene, the narrator is clearly the architect of it. She makes her observations with subtlety. If the principals seem randomly selected, we should not dismiss their interdependency. Points are introduced, but lines are suggested. The four trees remind us of four walls of a room or of a simple house. Only in her admission of an apparent lack of action does the poet intimate the poem's large irony, the chaos and disorder the poem pretends to present. Once again, it seems, a Dickinson poem has been successfully misunderstood.

The problem of Dickinson's phobia is, of course, never really solved. She considered metaphoric solutions and felt some reason for courage. Despite its geometry, the acre remains expansive. Of all the poem's principals, perhaps the silent and anonymous passerby might best speak with Dickinson's own voice. Dickinson, I think, often regarded herself as both a character and alien ("passerby") in her own environment. Whether on the streets of Amherst or in her own mind, freedom frightens her. The expansion of sunsets continues to symbolize for her inevitable darkness. Floors of the brain continue to collapse and perhaps minds can even explode. Every journey, every adventure, seems to end, if not in death, then in a perpetual and terrifying fall.

Still there are "worlds at every plunge." A letter Dickinson wrote to Abiah Root perhaps best captures the poet's ambivalence:

The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea....
I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters,
and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger.⁴⁷

Notes

¹ Vivian R. Pollak, Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 23.

² Shira Wolosky, Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 3.

³ Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 187.

⁴ Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 187.

⁵ Juhasz, p. 156.

⁶ "To Mrs. J. G. Holland," about 20 January 1856, Letter 182.

⁷ Cynthia Griffith Wolff, Emily Dickinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), p. 336.

⁸ Wolff, p. 97.

⁹ Wolosky, p. 130.

¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," in Shakespeare Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 114.

¹¹ Thorpe, p. 2.

¹² Welter, p. 59.

¹³ Welter, p. 60.

¹⁴ Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 25.

¹⁵ John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 352.

- 16 Cody, p. 353.
- 17 Cody, p. 277.
- 18 To Edward S. Dwight, 2 January 1862, Letter 246.
- 19 "To Samuel Bowles," about August 1862, Letter 272.
- 20 "To Samuel Bowles," early 1862, Letter 252.
- 21 "To T. W. Higginson," 25 April 1862, Letter 261.
- 22 Johnson, The Letters, p. 388.
- 23 Robert Weisbuch, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 123.
- 24 Weisbuch, pp. 123-24.
- 25 Weisbuch, p. 134.
- 26 Rich, p. 114.
- 27 Richard S. Hallam, Anxiety: Psychological Perspectives on Panic and Agoraphobia (New York: Harcourt, 1985), p. 37.
- 28 See page 3 of this work.
- 29 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 30.
- 30 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 30.
- 31 Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Ransom in a Voice': Language as Defense in Dickinson's Poetry," in Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson, ed. Suzanne Juhasz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 173.
- 32 Roland Hagenbuchle, p. 34.
- 33 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 44.
- 34 Inder Nath Kher, The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 71.
- 35 "To T. W. Higginson," 7 June 1862, Letter 265.
- 36 Kher, p. 116.
- 37 Greg Johnson, Emily Dickinson: Perception and the Poet's Quest, University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 37.
- 38 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 248.
- 39 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 248.

⁴⁰ Diehl, "'Ransom'," p. 173.

⁴¹ Wolff, p. 460.

⁴² Wolff, p. 461-62.

⁴³ Diehl, "'Ransom'," p. 166.

⁴⁴ Johnson, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Johnson, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Wolosky, p.2.

AUDIENCE AND SELF-DISCLOSURE:
OVERHEARING THE LYRICAL VOICES OF EMILY DICKINSON

In The Three Voices of Poetry, T. S. Eliot makes the observation that all poetry, even the most private lyric, was "meant to be overheard by other people."¹ Eliot's statement suggests much more than paradox: the very act of writing can involve the poet in a kind of duplicity. Even if the writer chooses not to publish his work, he is, nonetheless, "entertaining" an audience (or the idea of audience). Eliot offers the additional possibility that "part of our enjoyment of great poetry is the enjoyment of overhearing words which [presumably] are not addressed to us."²

Perhaps no poet so purposely arranges to be overheard as Emily Dickinson, ostensibly the most private of lyricists. We know, of course, of Dickinson's fondness for poses and enigma and for the conversation executed from behind half-closed doors. This deflected voice also speaks through the poems. Metaphor provides the skittish Dickinson a masquerade, an opportunity to "tell [obliquely] all the truth." Furthermore, Dickinson always presents a self-disclosing, or at least a self-seeking, truth. In a sense she speaks from an autobiographical perspective. The subject conducting the study becomes as well the object of her own study. In her exhaustive discussion of Dickinson's style, Brita Lindberg-Seyersted uses the Swedish term "centrallyrik" to describe the poet's writing, a "poetry of highly personal, often confessional character." Lindberg-Seyersted suggests the poems as well

as the letters are "expressions of the poet herself. The two kinds of writing are products of the same emotional need for expression."³ Indeed, reality in Dickinson's poetry is always lyrical, a response to a need to understand and to talk about her ambiguous experiences.

Fearful of an inability to voice her own experience, a Dickinson narrator confesses

Silence is all we dread
There's Ransom in a Voice--
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.

(J. 1251)

Voicelessness (Silence) perhaps overwhelms; it is "Infinity" and "all we dread." The "Ransom," which seems intrinsic to the voice, implies control or perhaps the power of negotiation. Often in Dickinson's poems, the voice seems to locate and/or to identify reality; it rescues the speaker from some faceless "Infinity" (death, madness, or more often an ambiguous non esse). As long as the Dickinson subject remains sentient, she discusses and analyzes her impressions of reality, and her ability to speak these things becomes a kind of reality-testing:

I heard, as if I had no Ear
Until a Vital Word
Came all the way from Life to me
And then I knew I heard.

(J. 1039)

Words echo back from the surface of the world and verify its existence. They testify to the world's authenticity, the authenticity of the particular world of the speaker. Words, or more precisely metaphors, familiarize and domesticate all she will then declare real. The voices in Dickinson's poems often rescue the victim or captive from gibbets,

they reflect upon Death's carriage ride, they even imagine the communities of the tomb.

In the Dickinson poem, silence announces the abyss and seems nearly synonymous with chaos:

Great Streets of Silence led away
To Neighborhoods of Pause--
Here was no Notice--no Dissent
No Universe--no Law--

(J. 1159)

Even in the several poems that identify death with a total failure of sensation, silence represents, paradoxically, the only "sensible" fact of death. The last line of "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died" (J. 465) apparently identifies failed vision at the moment of death:

There interposed a Fly--

With Blue--uncertain stumbling Buzz--
Between the light--and me--
And then the Windows failed--and then
I could not see to see--

Yet death is realized in the poem not by the failure of vision (although this failure does occur) but by the failure and cessation of language. Our narrator is the steadfast reporter of her own dying, the sensationism of the occasion dominates the report: the procession of mourners, the crying, the ritualistic waiting, the willing away of "Keepsakes." As the phenomenon draws to a conclusion, however, her ability to respond gradually diminishes; the senses become confused, undependable. She rationalizes her loss of vision: "The Window failed." She continues to speak, but language seems useful only for relating that "portion of [her]" which is "Assignable," the mere accoutrements of the experience. Indeed, the last "word" that she herself presumably recognizes as coming

from this world, the world of sensation, is the "blue buzz" of the unwelcomed and harshly physical fly. In order to demonstrate the resistance of the experience to language, the poet offers the final ambiguous line: "I could not see to see." We may feel we understand her meaning, but we are helpless to explicate it. The line suggests more than lost sight but less than lost awareness: the speaker remains sentient. The line successfully, I believe, calls attention to the inaccessibility of the loss and the inadequacy of language at this most important moment. In this accomplishment, the line seems sufficient, even eloquent. (It is perhaps to the poet's credit that so few of the critics who have discussed this poem have confidently explained the final and important line.)

If the Dickinson lyric declares or validates her subjective world, it must also declare an audience, the "other people" who the poet assumes are listening and for whose benefit the pose is often struck, the analogy made. Sometimes, however, Dickinson seems most ill-disposed toward audiences; reluctant to solicit their presence, she notoriously refuses their influence. To become public (published or for Dickinson even identified) is to become "like a Frog--" (J. 288). In another poem she will declare "Publication--is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man" (J. 709). (Ironically, this poem itself probably reflects an influence: the Emersonian concern for the integrity of the individual, which is continuously threatened by society.)

As a result of this shyness, Dickinson's writing claims a peculiar kind of starkness; it demonstrates an intense neglect of its societal and historical context. In the introduction to the letters, Thomas Johnson states that Dickinson was, in fact ahistorical: "[she]

did not live in history, past or current." Both the poems and the letters show little "interpretation of contemporary events," even of the Civil War, which was occurring during the height of her productivity.⁴ War is not even silently acknowledged in the background of most of the poems; Dickinson simply ignores it. Indeed, the total self-preoccupation of the poems almost eliminates the sense of background altogether. Astonishingly, the Civil War seems little more than an annoyance to her. She writes in 1861 to Mrs. Bowles: "I shall have no winter this year--on account of the soldiers--Since I cannot weave Blankets or Boots--I thought it best to omit the season."⁵

Her decision to "omit the season" was, of course, characteristic:

The rejection of society as such thus shows itself to have been total, not only physically but psychically. It was her kind of economy, a frugality she sought in order to make the most of her world; to focus, to come to grips with those universals which increasingly concerned her.

Despite this "economy," however, her work does not suffer an absence of community. Even the most inaccessible of her poems seem to be governed by a communicable intelligence; at times, they seem even chatty and oddly discursive. Dickinson will dare to begin a poem, "Before I got my eyes put out," as if this terrible "fact" about herself were, in some way, part of the listener's own history. Sometimes her poems begin in the middle of conversation: "Those--dying then, / Knew where they went" (J. 1551), "Such are the inlets of the mind--" (J. 1421). The epigrammatic tone, if not content, of many of the poems suggests things said for others', perhaps a community's, benefit or amusement: "Truth--is as old as God--" (J. 836), "The heart has many Doors--" (J. 1567), "Remorse--is Memory--awake--" (J. 744). Correctly or in-

correctly, readers of the Dickinson poem quickly fault themselves for the difficult moments; even in those poems that probably fail us, we sense the presence of an assumed audience whose qualifications and frame of reference would allow them to make sense of such ambiguous "universals." The undaunted reader must keep in mind that the community of the Dickinson poem often has "Great Streets of silence" and "Neighborhoods of Pause--."

Perhaps those "universals" about which she writes so obliquely must remain always indefinite, but they are not imponderable: they can be considered and again reconsidered. She acknowledges, as perhaps we have all acknowledged, a whole universe of problematic experiences. When she is "speechless" (or ambiguous or elliptic), we are commiserative; we, too, have known language to fail us, or not serve us well, when it seemed most needed. Perhaps this commiseration distinguishes our humanness, defines our place in her community. Paradoxically, she is both the most baffling and the most eloquent of poets. Despite her frequently disobliging discourse, Dickinson establishes a striking intimacy with the reader. The quality which makes Dickinson so attractive is, possibly, the urgency of the speaker, the impulse of the voice, seeking a sympathetic audience who might share her experiences.

Dickinson hoped to discover a sympathetic audience among her contemporaries but felt the probability unlikely. We know she began to experience at an early age a sense of separateness, an estrangement severe enough to be noted by her friends:

Mrs. Ford [Emily Fowler, a girlhood friend] recalled a "prophetic hint" in her early talks with Emily: "She once asked me if it did not make me shiver to hear a great many people talk--they took 'all the clothes off their souls'.

At this time she had a demurer manner which brightened easily into fun when she felt at home, but she was [often] rather shy, silent, and even deprecating." Lively and talented as Emily's friends were, and much as she loved them, it is clear that they represented, or came to represent in her mind, much that frustrated her and, ultimately drove her inward.⁷

In a letter written in 1850 to her close childhood friend Abiah Root, Dickinson frankly discusses her alienation: "We are growing away from each other and talk even now like strangers."⁸ Of her friend Abby Wood, she writes: "Our lots fall in different places.... We take different views of life, our thoughts would not dwell together as they used to when we were young."⁹ Years later Higginson will repeat, in a letter to his wife, the matured Dickinson's severe evaluation of humanity in general:

"How do most people live without any thoughts. There are so many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street). How do they live. How do they get the strength to put on their clothes in the morning."¹⁰

Ironically, the development of her isolation coincides with her realization of her power with language and her confidence as a writer. By her early twenties, her "Lexicon" had very nearly become, if not her only "companion," then at least one of her best "companions." No doubt she often felt ambivalent about her talent. Choosing to live her own words and thoughts, she recognized her own genius. To her cousin Clara Turner, Dickinson writes: "I don't speak things like the rest."¹¹ The comment may acknowledge a relationship between language and alienation. Dickinson may have intimated that her isolation in some way resulted from the resistance of her experience to language. In fact she may have felt that her isolation resulted directly from the failure of a language which did not allow her to share her unusual experiences of the world.

Almost certainly Dickinson turned to Higginson in hope of discovering a sympathetic, perhaps even useful, reader. (No doubt she had decided long before 1862, the year of the first letter to Higginson, that her sister-in-law, Susan, was not giving good advice.) Furthermore, Dickinson, confident of her own ability, simply wished for some recognition. As Richard Sewall has noted, the famous Dickinson "disavowal about publishing can hardly be taken literally. After all, she had sent [Higginson] the poems in response to his article on how young writers could get their work published."¹² One feels, however, that Higginson's responses were being more carefully scrutinized than Dickinson's poems. Very early during their long correspondence, she apparently adjudged Higginson a worthy friend but an unsuccessful audience. Although she continued to solicit his assistance, her poems demonstrate that she strenuously ignored his advice and resisted his influence. Poetry was one arena, as I have suggested, in which Dickinson wielded jealous control. One does not sense that Dickinson became obsequious in her advice-seeking: she is genuinely attentive but not deferential. Her resistance remained, as David Porter has suggested, "imperious and uncompromising."¹³ Because of the special function of poetry in her life, the possibility of authenticating experience with language, compromise must have seemed to her impossible. Concessions would have declared counterfeit the very experiences which she hoped her audience might help to confirm.

The privilege of "overhearing" Emily Dickinson, of becoming her sympathetic audience or reader, is complicated by the poet's refusal to admit a personal investment in her poems. Dickinson hoped her audience would not mistakenly identify her from the poems. In a letter

to Higginson, she delivers her position: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Voice--it does not mean--me--but a supposed person."¹⁴ It is paradoxical that this most egocentric of poets strives to deflect her voice and, ultimately, her responsibility for what her poems say. Dickinson offers the disclaimer to Higginson to deflect self-publicity. With her warning, Dickinson wishes to frustrate those who might think they had found her, those who would believe they had identified the person behind the voice.

Dickinson recognizes the complexity of the self, of herself, and, in fact, discovering, or unraveling, this complexity is the "plot" of many of the poems. Typically, a self-perplexed narrator struggles to untangle her identity. "Seam by Seam," she methodically mends the split brain which eventually rolls from her lap "like Balls" of yarn "Upon the Floor" (J. 937). She strains to see the self behind the self (J. 670); and had she the "Art," she would "banish," she tells us, "Me from Myself" (J. 642). Her brain has corridors (J. 670); and her soul is cavernous (J. 777), a lost boat (J. 107). She calls the self in search of itself an "explorer" and declares it "this ecstatic Nation" (J. 1354), the "Undiscovered Continent" (J. 832). In a number of poems, Dickinson demonstrates that she is both jealous and proud of her complexities. Identity, she will show us, is not granted but rather claimed: "I'm ceded," she will declare; "I've stopped being theirs" (J. 508). The range of Dickinson's voices suggests we should reach a decision about neither poems nor poet too quickly.

Unfortunately a small cluster of the Dickinson voices have become popularly representative. Immaturity and delicateness, foolishness, and perhaps even lunacy all but define the mythic Dickinson.

Mabel Todd, who became the poet's friend, must bear at least part of the responsibility for the perpetuation of the "Myth of Amherst." In November 1881, two months after Todd's arrival in Amherst, she writes to her parents;

I must tell you about the character of Amherst. It is a lady who the people call the Myth. She has not been outside of her house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, and viewed it by moonlight. No one who calls upon her mother and sister ever sees her, but she allows little children once in a great while, and one at a time, to come in, when she gives them cake or candy..., for she is very fond of little ones. But more often she lets down the sweetmeat by a string, out of a window, to them. She dresses wholly in white and her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. Her sister ... invited me to come and sing to her mother some time and I promised to go ... [if] the performance pleases her, a servant will enter with wine for me, or a flower, and perhaps her thanks; [more often], a few days after, some dainty present will appear for me at twilight. People tell me that the myth will hear every note--she will be near, but unseen.... Isn't that like a book?¹⁵

The letter probably reveals more about the young Mrs. Todd's penchant for romance than about Dickinson's preciousness. Nevertheless, it has become "a locus classicus for most of the elements that make up the still current myth."¹⁶ Todd's contribution to the myth was, of course, inadvertent. Ironically, she would become one of the first admirers of Dickinson's work. Recognizing Dickinson's "genius" and the "remarkable" quality of her verse, Todd would devote much of her life to the compilation and publication of the poems. Eventually she would see through the Dickinson pose (for Dickinson, of course, shares responsibility for the myth) and declare her friend both "very brilliant and strong."¹⁷ Todd's discovery of this side of Dickinson's character is extraordinary given the terms of their friendship: during the five years of their relationship, ending with Emily's death, Todd was never granted a face-to-face meeting with her friend.

Unfortunately, the "Myth of Amherst" found a place in the canon of American literature (or lore) a half century before the poems do. Early editions and selections for anthologies intentionally complemented the image of the frail poet in white. A myth will find its own momentum, and its heroes are often exhausted by the force. In the decades immediately following Dickinson's death, even the figure which the myth carries (the Dickinson Isolato) dulls. Reduced to the caricature of the heroic, Dickinson's heroism becomes mere eccentricity. The mystery which first circulated the streets of Amherst ("her mind is said to be wonderful") is routinized by the rumor. The perplexity of the character, which is responsible for the myth, is itself simplified. At first, it seems, society wishes only for the mythology; eventually it forces the myth to conform to its own logic and prejudices. (The Dickinson myth, as we will see, is still forced to reflect popular biases.) Once at least interesting and enigmatic, Dickinson becomes apprehensible, even insipid. Adrienne Rich summarizes the pervasive and prejudicial influence of the myth:

A strain in the Dickinson letters and poems [suggests] a self-diminutization.... And this emphasis on her "littleness," along with the deliberate strangeness of her tactics of seclusion, have been, until recently, accepted as the prevailing character of the poet: the fragile poetess in white, sending flowers and poems by messengers; writing, but somehow naively.¹⁸

To the reader who is attentive, however, Dickinson's small whisper is confident and sufficient. As I have suggested, poetry is the one arena in which Dickinson clearly felt her power and control. We now recognize the bold ironies in the submissive voice, the childish giggle. The speaker of these poems does present herself as diminutive and self-

effacing, even unworthy. However, in her childlike and apparently unsophisticated way, the small voice dares to challenge even the realities of faith. If her voice sounds too soft for God's ear, she will suggest that this is God's fault. If she is too small for His attention, then she will make Him seem small by His indifference. Faith, she will imply, is a desperate and futile gesture, as effective as the "Bird [that] stamped her foot" against the air (J. 376). Courageously, however, the "Timid ... Bird" will ask for a second chance to enter heaven (J. 248). She imagines how she would behave if she were "the Gentleman / In the White Robe." Rhetorically she questions whether He should show less sympathy than she: "[if] they--were the little Hand--that knocked-- / Could--I--forbid?"

If in proportion to God our speaker must be infinitesimally small, she questions God using a child's wisdom and a child's faith:

I know that He exists.
Somewhere--in Silence--
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.
'Tis a fond Ambush--
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But--should the play
Prove piercing earnest--
Should the glee--glaze
In Death's--stiff--stare--

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest--
Have crawled too far!

(J. 338)

The question of the poem is not one of faith: "I know that He exists." Instead, the poem challenges God's mercy and wisdom. It asks

whether God has gone too far, overstepped the bounds of simple decency, by making His presence in this world so difficult to discover. Our narrator will use playground metaphors to make sense of, or at least to investigate, His motives. Presumably, the selection of this kind of metaphor demonstrates our narrator's inadequacy in the presence of God. Perhaps it demonstrates that a gulf exists between logic and faith: attempting to make God sensible is, the strategy might suggest, puerile and unavailing. The success of the argument, however, results not from metaphor or logic but from the tone of the speaker's voice. Although she acknowledges her own inferiority when she admits that God's "rare life" cannot possibly be witnessed with "our gross eyes," she speaks, nonetheless, with authority and wisdom. The logic is simple, childlike, but the speaker seems strong and mature. She is sophisticated enough to recognize the power in simple analogy. Even children recognize the baseness of the joke that has "crawled too far," the "fun" that has become "too expensive." This world may be all "play" to God, but to us it is "piercing earnest."

The small but defiant voice reflects, of course, only one of the several most frequently heard Dickinson voices. The range of positions suggested by these voices is considerable, the attitudes often contradictory. the narrator can be stoic, speaking with a heroic acceptance of her experience: "After great pain, a formal feeling comes--" (J. 341); "We grow accustomed to the Dark" (J. 419). She can be agreeable, sometimes even obsequious: "Henceforth, a Dedicated sort" (J. 273); "My Sovereign is offended-- / To Gain his grace--I'd die!" (J. 235). The voice can be paradoxical: "Much Madness is divinest Sense--" (. 435); it can be ironic and scathing: "What Soft--Cherubic Creatures-- / Those

Gentle women are--" (J. 401). Often the speaker appears curious and given to a kind of provincial gossip: "A house upon the Hight--" (J. 399); "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (J. 389). In many of the conjugal poems, the voice seems happily submissive: "Forever of His fate to taste" (J. 246), "I tend my flowers for thee--" (J. 339). As we shall see, however, a voice raised in anger, perhaps violently, is heard in a small but important cluster of poems in which the narrator wrests her identity away from a husband or father (or god) figure: "I'm ceded-- I've stopped being Theirs--" (J. 508). "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--" (J. 754).

Voice is a complex consideration in the Dickinson poems. When Dickinson warns Higginson about the "supposed person" who is the "Representative of the Verse," she acknowledges, no doubt, the multiple dimensions of both her work and her personality. Robert Weisbuch suggests Dickinson's disclaimer is itself a masquerade or pose,

the kind of statement [the] poet makes to protect her inner life from her own desire to investigate it; and personae [in the poems] are deliberately chosen and thus, however, fictional, somehow indicative.¹⁹

Weisbuch implies in his work that Dickinson resists self-analysis; her poses allow her to avoid direct observation of herself. The position of even so fine a critic as Weisbuch possibly demonstrates the influence of the "Myth of Amherst," as it has survived and evolved a hundred years after its inception. The legend has been appropriated and reinterpreted by those neo-Freudians who apparently have discovered in Dickinson, as we shall see, the perfect case study of repression. Their reduction of Dickinson and her poetry demonstrates perhaps the

logical course for the mythology in a post-Freudian age. Nonetheless, the development of this argument often seems paradoxical. Even as these critics uncover and acknowledge evidence of Dickinson's willingness to analyze herself, they insist upon repression as the basis of her poetry.

If Mabel Todd is responsible for launching the Myth of Amherst, then the Dickinson biographer John Cody must take credit for developing this paradoxical dimension to the Myth:

Emily Dickinson [was aware] that a glimpse into the hidden depths of the personality should be avoided because it exposes one to the danger of being overwhelmed.²⁰

Cody believes Dickinson specifically represses guilt feelings and "denigrating attitudes toward her mother," the result of "maternal deprivation." Yet on the next page of his biography, Cody acknowledges and apparently applauds Dickinson's preoccupation with these "hidden depths":

Evidence of Emily Dickinson's unusual awareness of psychic processes that ordinary go unnoticed by the mass of mankind can be found on almost every page of her writing. One might justifiably assert that such observations constitute a major portion of her subject matter. Moreover, her formulations of her major themes--death, love, and nature--in addition to the philosophical and externally descriptive characteristics they possess, are almost invariably colored and livened by psychological insight.²¹

I find Cody's reconciliation of Dickinson's alleged repression and her "psychological insight" difficult to understand. He seems to suggest that metaphor functions as a kind of subterfuge rather than as expression in Dickinson's poems. The poems are, in a sense, rather accidental. (A number of critics, including Cody, have offered the possibility that

Dickinson became a successful poet instead of a successful woman.)

Apparently to support his argument, Cody asks us to understand the intrinsically

'metaphorical' character of psychotic thought and its resemblances to poetic thought.... The more one studies the verbalization of the 'insane' the more one is aware of underlying meaning.... Given Emily Dickinson's faculty in the manipulation of symbolism and imagery and the complexity and subtlety one expects of her writing, it might easily happen that occasional autistic utterances would pass as poetic obscurities.²²

If we acknowledge Dickinson as a poet (and even Cody does), we must allow her her use of metaphors. Dickinson's voices are not the "occasional autistic utterances" but rather, as Weisbuch notes, deliberate and "somehow indicative."

Probably no other poet has been more determined than Dickinson to negotiate with the self, to encourage it to the surface and into language (by way of metaphor) where it might be understood. Often, as we have witnessed in the poems, this effort costs her great pain. Dickinson is hopeful of articulating these discoveries. In fact, as even Cody recognizes, self-knowledge may very nearly be Dickinson's only concern. Metaphor is Dickinson's tool and not, as Cody implies, a subterfuge. Despite the poses and multiple personae, Dickinson is never fraudulent. With characteristic concision, Richard Sewall concludes: "It was Dickinson's constant aim, her life action, to make her 'truth' clear."²³

It may be that the Dickinson lyric is not so unusual in this respect. Dickinson may be eccentric only in her obsessive need to be lyrical. Not only the poems and letters but her life as well suggest a kind of lyric style. In The Three Voices of Poetry, Eliot dis-

cusses the characteristic egocentricism of the lyric moment. He locates the origin of the lyric in the "creative germ" within the poet. This germ is experienced subjectively as a kind of vague anxiety, an "obscure impulse." Eliot's investigation is, I believe, particularly relevant to the phobic Dickinson's situation. His metaphoric model will allow us not only to approach the biographical impulse which directs Dickinson's poetry but also to understand characteristics of Dickinson's phobia and its important relationship to both her poetry and her need to write poetry.

Eliot offers two metaphors in his theory:

He [the lyric poet] has something germinating in him for which he must find words; but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words; he cannot identify the embryo until it has been transformed into an arrangement of the right words in the right order. When you have the right words for it, the "thing" for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by the poem.

In the second metaphoric perspective,

[The lyric poet] is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestations it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words of the poem he makes are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon.²⁴

Eliot's model allows us to recognize the intrinsically subjective disposition of the lyric. The ambiguous "thing" about which the lyricist would write is essentially autobiographical: one locates it in the poet's subjective experience. The vagueness of the "thing" perhaps implies a resistance to language. Even in Eliot's essay, the "demon"--both "nameless" and "faceless"--appears problematic; each poem, by definition, necessitates its removal. "The words of the poem" do not identify the demon; they are instead the process by which it might be

expelled, i.e., the process of poem-making. Nonetheless, the poet's compulsion (both irresistible and irrational, it must be considered a compulsion) is to coax the "thing" to the surface of consciousness where analogies to the objective world might be drawn, where identification can be made. The poet hopes, perhaps fatuously, that the poem will mediate between the worlds of subjective feeling and objective identification.

Not the least interesting distinction of Eliot's discussion is his decision to use two metaphors for this phenomenon. Indeed, his metaphors nearly imply two distinct and contradictory attitudes toward the process. Eliot seems to acknowledge the poet's ambivalence toward the creation of the poem. Although it suggests difficulty and pain, the birth metaphor offers an auspicious beginning. The movement (the growth and birth) of the "creative germ" is procreative and generally benign. The exorcism, of course, offers a more desperate attitude. Purgative instead of procreative, the movement accomplishes a kind of restoration, or homeostasis, rather than birth. Furthermore, the relationship between the poet and the poem is nearly contradictory in the two metaphors. Organically connected to the poet, embryo implies kinship. The relationship to the demon, however, is naturally inimical. An interloper, the demon's invasion, or intrusion, makes the poet feel helpless and passive. The ingression suggests abnormality; the germination suggests normality and naturalness.

For both representations, expulsion (birth and exorcism) involves the process of identification, the impulse of discovery and articulation. In the birth metaphor, the "something ... for which [the poet] must find words" engages his attention. In the demon metaphor, the

cause of the poet's discomfort (for it is discomfort which encourages the poet to write the poem) seems to be the facelessness and namelessness of the "thing" within. The second metaphor also implies a relationship between naming (identifying) and power (control): the "thing" which the poet experiences subjectively but cannot name, she feels powerless to influence.

Paradoxically, each successful poem exists as evidence of failure. The poem names not the "thing" but rather the thing "transformed." The embryo eventually disappears, "replaced by a poem." According to the demon metaphor, the poem names the process of the expulsion. Although the poem allows the "obscure impulse" to be abated (perhaps only temporarily abated), it can neither identify nor articulate the subjective and beginning moment. Moreover, Eliot's summation even implies a lack of similarity between the "thing" and the finished poem. The "creative impulse," which is organically related to the poet (which is, in a sense, autobiographical) represents one thing, and "the right words in the right order" represents another. The poet never accomplishes his objective of finding a metaphor to carry the nameless demon. As the poem demands more of the poet's attention, the "thing" itself slips away. The subjective feeling, the embryo, and the poem demonstrate a kind of metonymic relationship, a relationship based on association and not resemblance (although the lyricists might hope for "resemblance"). The finished poem does not resemble the impulse in any way. However, because its whole "life," or being, has been associated with and dependent upon the subjectivity of the poet, because it is in a sense autobiographical, both poem and impulse share a familiarity, a reminder in one of the other.

Certainly Dickinson may have recognized the autobiographical possibilities, even necessities, of lyric poetry. While "true" self-

expression may be impossible even in the most lyrical poems, the poet keeps trying. Metaphor does supply a certain agreeable substitution for this self-articulation.

James Olney's Metaphors of Self offers an eloquent examination of the relationship between metaphor and autobiography. Although we feel self-experiences as distinct "things," we cannot, Olney suggests, approach them except metaphorically. Subjectivity is "infinitely difficult to get at, to encompass, to know except privately and intuitively; it is, for each of us, only itself...."²⁵ We cannot, of course, physically encounter our subjective world (Dickinson might represent this dilemma by "Ourself behind ourself"). However, "we do see and touch [our] metaphors and the metaphorizing."²⁶ I would disagree only with Olney's implication of representation; I would offer the possibility instead that we "know" the self as it is predicated by the metaphORIZATION, by the activity of creating metaphor. Metaphorization declares both the self and its need for articulation. Both Dickinson and Eliot recognize, I believe, that the lyric is as close as one can get in language to self-expression, and both would perhaps acknowledge that the lyric fails, at least in this respect.

It should not be surprising to find one poet's metaphors useful in understanding another poet's craft. Beyond the general utility of Eliot's model of the lyric, however, we discover an application specific to Dickinson's life. Certain striking and revealing analogies exist between the subjective nature of the lyric and the subjective nature of agoraphobia. We cannot know whether Dickinson recognized these analogies. We do know, however, her two obsessions were herself and her language, and we might suspect that such an intensely focused perspective might have

encouraged her to regard her anxieties and her lifestyle, in some sense, metaphorically.

Fundamental to both the lyric (according to Eliot's model) and to Dickinson's phobia is an extremely subjective viewpoint. Both result from an urgency to identify and to articulate some intensely personal and yet uncomfortable experience. The poet feels powerless in the face of his unnamed experience; the agoraphobic feels overwhelmed. For both the lyricist and the agoraphobic, the experience feels ambiguous and its identification remains problematic. Both are convinced that articulation of the experience will allow them to realize a kind of personal control or power. Articulation of the experience, naming it, would require locating or relocating (exorcising) the subjective experience into the objective world. Most important, at least for the agoraphobic who is also a poet, is the possible function of language in this endeavor: metaphor offers the hope of mediation between the subjective experience and the objective definition of that experience. Metaphor seems to offer a possibility of knowing oneself.

The agoraphobic lifestyle, the structure it demands, is itself a kind of nonverbal figuration or identification of the world. "Home" for the phobic assumes meanings of security and control; to be felt safe, everything must be familiarized, or "domesticated." "Domestication," as I will use the word, requires adaptation of the environment to the advantage and for the personal control of the phobic. "Home," metaphorically locates that environment (wherever and however the agoraphobic manages it) having what the poet Hopkins will call "the taste of myself."²⁷

Metaphorization of the home space (domestication) also results in the metaphorization of foreign environments (or objects, or feelings,

or even people) over which the phobic feels he has no control. This metaphorization, or domestication, requires avoidance or flight from environments, foreign environments, felt to be inimical. As with most agoraphobics, however, Dickinson's metaphorization offers only partial and imperfect respite. We know Dickinson's "home," where she hoped to realize control, ironically became increasingly more restrictive. We also know she recognized her "metaphorical" responses to the world often were unnecessary and unreasonable. Dickinson noted, we will remember, after an apparent anxiety attack: "[And] there I sat, and sighed, and wondered [why] I was scared so...."²⁸

It is no accident, I believe, that Dickinson's poems seem so personal and yet remain so inscrutable, so filled with the presence of the poet and yet telling us so little about her. The metaphors populated with ghosts and goblins and phantoms speak about a need which is itself illusive. Dickinson demands from language the opportunity only for self-identification, the possibility of understanding, or at least facing, the infinitely evasive and inconstant subconscious. One identifies "Ourself behind ourself" only with great difficulty. "Perception of an object costs," Dickinson tells us, "Precise[ly] the Object's loss" (J. 1071). In a sense, the "superior spectre," the "face I never saw before," even perhaps that "Face of Steel" (death), offer only failed metaphors. They demonstrate the poet's intention and her desperation.

Her efforts to understand her fear, to locate a stimulus (metaphoric) for her own puzzling response to the world, encourage her to experiment with language. And yet, she will often conclude her experimentation by admitting "It was not Death," or "Frost," or even Chaos," though

"it tasted like them all." When she tells us her mind has been cleaved or her brain has dropped or the "Plank in Reason" has given way, she is only saying the experience is so unreasonable. When she can find no other definition or explanation for her feelings and behavior, feelings and behavior which she herself regarded as peculiar, she will then ask: "Could it be Madness--this?" The voice in the poem, therefore, does not identify the poet or her experience. Instead, I believe, it speaks from the poet's desire that she herself and her world (as she experienced it) should make some kind of sense. From out of this chaos (Dickinson's own experience of herself) comes this sublime "failure": "the right words in the right order."

The Dickinson audience recognizes in the voice of many of the poems something which speaks autobiographically but does not directly speak about autobiography. Dickinson's self-preoccupation presents perhaps greater stylistic problems than thematic ones. Her work persuades us, and often we cannot say how we are persuaded, that the poet is at the heart of each poem. The voice speaks with the anxiety of someone whose self-absorption influences everything she says or does. It is the voice of someone profoundly solipsistic, who sees in every shade of nature something of her own hue. Neither accidentally nor intentionally lyrical, the poems demonstrate instead an intrinsic lyricism, written by a woman who knew only one subject. Indeed, to imagine Dickinson writing anything else in any other way would be to imagine another Dickinson. (Even most of her letters strike us as more lyrical than narrative or informative.) The burden of the poetic voice is nearly always personal. Indian summer is not just a natural phenomenon; it represents the individualized symbol of some deeply intimate, deeply spiritual experience. The "death

in the opposite house" worries our speaker. It occurs to make the fragility of her own life much more obvious and much more painfully felt.

The most conspicuous manifestation of this lyricism is, of course, the ubiquitous first person. Lindberg-Seyersted's estimation that two-fifths of the poems "revolve around an explicit 'I'" seems conservative. Occurring nearly fifteen hundred times, "I" is easily the most frequently used word in the Dickinson canon.²⁹ Even in those poems which do not explicitly begin with the first person as a concern, the narrator will often surprise us with her sudden appearance. Often a discussion of nature will become suddenly emblematic of something within the self:

These are the days when Birds come back--
A very few--a Bird or two--
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old--old sophistries of June--
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee--
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear--
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze--
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblem to partake--
Thy consecrated bread to take
And their immortal wine! (J. 130)

The poem is certainly one of Dickinson's loveliest. Its subject is Indian summer, a nostalgic favorite with Dickinson.

The poem represents several early poems, according to David Porter, in which the "focus on nature as spectacle" is transformed into nature "as symbol of the aspirer's goal."³⁰ I agree that the focus of the poem moves in toward the "aspirer's goal" and, therefore, away from nature. Porter, however, ignores the literal importance of nature in the poem: at no time does the poem really concern "nature as spectacle." Even in the first stanza, the bird interests us because something about its behavior seems familiar or human. In what seems to be some human-like appraisal of its situation, the bird pauses "to take a backward look." The naturalness of the transition from nature to the individual is accomplished only because the aspirer's situation reminds us of something we have seen before, something prefigured in the bird's (in nature's) situation. In scope, the transformation seems a difficult one to make. We the audience must accept one character (the aspirer/narrator) in lieu of another (the bird) in whom we have been made to feel interested and to whom we have become somewhat responsive. We must also accept the poem's transition from the secular to the spiritual, from concrete to symbolic occupations.

The intense and yet casually executed concentration upon the bird's "backward look" captures a kind of sorrow which seems sudden yet natural and wholly unconscious. Almost immediately the bird suggests something of the symbolic. We do not yet know the nature of this symbol except to recognize in its flight, its "birdness," and its "backward look" the opportunity for symbolic stature. Dickinson has successfully encouraged us to accept the symbol without knowledge of its reference. Suggested nearly simultaneously in the double-take of the bird are the

realization of the inappropriateness of the situation and the inconsequentiality of the bird's mistake. If there is call for correction or alarm (and, indeed, there might be for our wayfaring bird), the poem does not answer it. However, in the backwardness of its glance (and of its situation) something effects sadness. The "sophistries of June" have perhaps made the bird appreciative of summer and sensitive to its swiftly approaching close.

In the middle of the poem, the focus openly switches from the bird with the sudden, but perhaps expected, involvement of the narrator. Her voice in the first two stanzas sounds dispassionate, reportorial: "These are the days when Birds come back--," "a Bird or two." The interjection introducing the third stanza ("Oh fraud") announces the narrator's active participation in the spectacle. As the poem continues, the narrator's presence gradually dominates the spectacle. By the penultimate stanza, her involvement has become as intimate as the symbolic reception of sacrament. Spectator has become participant; as communicant, she stands at the very center of the activity. Impersonal observation has effected a personal invocation: "Oh Sacrament of summer day / Oh Last Communion in the Haze--." As a result of this relocation of the speaker to the poem's foreground, the scene itself is transformed, and the bird, poised in its human-like moment, is abandoned.

The bird, however, is not forgotten by the poet. Its presence allows the audience to complete the poem, to regard it as an integrated whole. Only in the final lines of the poem does the bird's symbolic stature make sense to the reader: the bird has the potential to become the personal symbol of the aspirer/narrator. It will be, however, her task, her act of faith, to accept the bird-symbol as her own. Her

search for and use of conventional symbols, which may seem to us ineffectual and obvious by comparison, suggest reluctance and subterfuge. Her goal, she claims, is merely the acceptance and enjoyment of the Indian summer days: "Permit a child to join," she asks. In order to complete this communion, to appreciate it fully, her enjoyment should be unencumbered by logic and skepticism; it should be child-like (or perhaps bird-like). Like the bird, she must accept the "plausibility" of the phenomenon. What is demanded of the aspirer is the simplest, yet perhaps the most difficult, act of faith, the acceptance of the miraculous, the acceptance of the suspension of time (the Indian summer) which the personalized bird-symbol represents.

The "I" regarding itself, the "I" as both subject and object, distinguishes Dickinson's poetry. In a small but important group of poems, this self-preoccupation becomes a kind of self-declaration. Struggling to free or to claim her identity, often from a husband or father (god) figure, the speaker is not difficult to overhear. The voice is so distinctive and so much a contrast to the traditional (mythical) voices which we often identify as Dickinson's as to seem almost compensatory. Only in the subtle ironies of the traditional voices do we detect any clue that this dimension exists in the Dickinson persona. The voice of these few poems that deal specifically with self-identity rarely sounds subtle; when given to irony, the voice is unambiguous, the tone nearly sarcastic. Loud and uncompromising, at times this Dickinson voice seems almost aggressive:

I'm ceded--I've stopped being Their's--
 The name They dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now,

[no stanza break]

And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading--too--

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace--
Unto supremest name--
Called to my Full--the Crescent dropped--
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank--too small the first--
Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--
A half unconscious Queen--
But this time--Adequate--Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown--

(J. 508)

Typical of Dickinson's work, the language of the poem is informed with the rich symbolism available in sectarian ritual. Using the specific relationship between baptism (christening) and naming, the poem becomes a declaration of self-identity, autonomy. The comparison of her two baptisms allows the defiant speaker to make her position clear. The first identity was conferred upon her, "dropped upon [her] face," presumably with the symbolic baptismal water. Although passive, the conferee had the potential for awareness: a "half unconscious Queen" but "without the choice." By right of the initial christening, she was "Theirs," "Crowned [and] crowing--on [her] Father's breast." The distinction between God-the-Father, in whose house the ritual takes place and whose existence the sacrament reaffirms, and the biological or legal father into whose household she has been born and named, is unclear. "Father," secular or sectarian, symbolizes extended authority and control; it represents any identification that does not find its source within the individual. The first identification apparently affords only a temporary usefulness: she is "finished using now" the name given her "in the country church."

The second naming, unlike the first, is accomplished with the speaker selecting "consciously of Grace." Her posture in relationship to God (and to the father) implies a more egalitarian pose: "this time--Adequate--Erect." Our speaker regards her second christening as a kind of matriculation. The image of the first naming suggests infancy and dependency; the subject actually rests upon the father's breast. Despite the numbed consciousness and the existential stupor the first identification requires, it is not without its attractiveness. The conferee at this point seems protected, secure, and even loved. The individual choosing her own "Grace" and identity makes it very clear that maturity plays a part in the process. Her first name, she suggests, might be put away with her "Dolls" and "childhood." Self-identity, furthermore, results in or is identified with self-awareness, the awakening of the Queen to a full consciousness and with her own power.

I find unconvincing the argument of those critics who identify this second christening as a marriage or the poem as a "love poem ... which glorifies the new state of grace that love confers on [the speaker]." ³¹ Although the speaker chooses a name, we should not immediately conclude her new state of "Grace" is marriage. Indeed, the rejection of traditional feminine roles might be suggested by the "string of spools" which she has "finished threading." More than unconvincing, the argument supporting the marriage theme is perhaps irrelevant. The path chosen matters not as much as the decision to take charge of one's own life, the "will to choose, or to reject." We hear in this poem, I believe, a proto-feminist voice found only in a few Dickinson poems. The tone seems compatible with the concerns of such women as Elizabeth

Stoddard or perhaps Margaret Fuller, who saw that women often quietly assumed the status of grown-up children. Dickinson, like Fuller, seems to encourage self-determination, the selection of one's own "Grace." Our speaker is determined, it seems to me, to select her own name; symbolically she identifies herself as separate and even equal, standing "Adequate--Erect."

Only in the identity poems do we find Dickinson's voice so bold. We should not be surprised to discover that autonomy will not be compromised in a world as self-centered and as self-reflexive as Dickinson's. In another important identity poem, the voice is not merely assertive but actually aggressive. In this example, irony is used almost violently:

My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--
In Corners till a Day
The Owner passed--identified--
And carried Me away--

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods--
And now We hunt the Doe--
And every time I speak for Him--
The Mountains straight reply--

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow--
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through--

And when at Night--Our good Day done--
I guard My Master's Head--
'Tis better than the Eider--Duck's--
Deep Pillow--to have shared--

To foe of His--I'm deadly foe--
None stir the second time--
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye--
Or an emphatic Thumb--

Though I than He--may longer live
He longer must--than I--
For I have but the power to kill,
Without--the power to die--

(J. 754)

In recent years, this poem has become a "touchstone text for Dickinson scholarship."³² Critics, however, has disagreed about the poem at the most fundamental level: even its subject seems an area for debate. Some readers believe it to be a poem about love. Others, certainly the more imaginative, have found in the poem evidence of the Oedipal struggle. One critic, perhaps exasperated with the many and often unusual interpretations, calls the poem a complex allegorical "design which could apply to almost any topic we could imagine."³³

The most frequent question, however, raised about the poem is the identity and function of the metaphoric gun. Most readers seem to agree the poem focuses on the power of words. In this interpretation, the "metaphoric gun becomes the instrument of language."³⁴ Many feminist critics have found in this poem evidence suggesting Dickinson's awareness of the dilemma faced by women writers in the nineteenth century: "My Life had stood" is a "central poem in understanding Emily Dickinson and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist particularly in the nineteenth century."³⁵ At the very least, we might agree with David Porter and call the poem "a central expression of [Dickinson's] circumstance."³⁶

The circumstance of Dickinson's life which the poem perhaps attempts to articulate is her concurrent struggles toward self-identification and articulation. The poet immediately establishes associations between the metaphoric gun and identity ("The Owner passed--identified") and between the gun and voice ("I speak for Him"). At this early point in the poem, the voice we hear denies rather than affirms the self. It validates someone else's power and control: it speaks for "Him." As in "I'm Ceded--," the narrator's identity is conferred upon her by an

external agent. In both poems, the narrator begins life with passive but potentially vigorous roles: the "half unconscious Queen" resting on the "Father's breast" and the "Loaded Gun" waiting in "corners." The second poem, not unlike the first, regards identification almost legally. Identity is the result of ownership or the claiming of rightful property by an outside agent ("The Owner passed--identified--"). Ownership precedes the encounter. The "identified" gun is not only recognized and claimed, it is also furnished a kind of life, an identity, as a result of the encounter. Its "gunness" will be eventually realized. Removed from "Corners," no longer passive, it becomes operative, dynamic, and vocal. (Eventually the gun will seek out and claim its own identity and will speak with its own frightening and uncertain voice.)

Both "My Life" and "I'm Ceded--" concern the difficult evolution of selfhood. However, "My Life," unlike "I'm Ceded--," also gives attention to the problem of self-expression. In this important work, Dickinson suggests that self-identity and self-expression are concurrent, and perhaps interdependent, phenomena. The narrator's struggle for autonomy becomes also a struggle for expression. Perhaps the voice seems chaotic and confused, even at times insane, only because the situation about which it speaks is so difficult and unapproachable. The narrator seems on the edge of violence, and the voice, pushed to the edge of sensibility, reflects this chaos and frustration.

The complicated metaphoric structure of the poem possibly speaks of both concerns, identity and articulation. The voice (voices) which originates concurrently with the self-actualization of the gun must record the growing violence and rebelliousness of the gun without collapsing into anarchy itself. Dickinson's curious project in this poem seems

not merely to metaphorize but also to allow the metaphor its own frustration, its own moment of expression: the metaphor is, in a sense, "speaking" for a frustrated and exhausted language. The narrator, therefore, speaks not only for the lyrical first person implied in the opening "My Life," but also for the metaphor itself. At some point in the poem, we notice that the gun (the metaphor) develops some peculiarly human habits and traits.

The first line establishes the basic metaphor: the narrator finds her life analogous to a resting, but loaded, gun. A number of secondary and implied personae complicate this primary metaphor: the simmering volcano, the lover, the killer. The poet creates metaphors for her metaphors: the gun offers analogies for itself. The "Vesuvian face" is a metaphor not for the poem's remote first person but for the gun itself. The intimacy between the gun and the Master, their roaming of the woods together and their sharing of the bed, serves to humanize the gun further rather than to strengthen the analogy with which the poem was begun. Becoming bizarrely human, the gun grows more interesting. In a sense, language has failed the first person of the poem. Finding its own voice, the metaphor has become her caricature.

At first the voice is not autonomous. Although powerful, eliciting from the mountain "a straight reply," it speaks first and faithfully for the Master. The third stanza gives us the first sinister indication of a power wishing to represent itself:

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through--

The smile prefigures a number of human-like activities which will be realized independently of the Master. The voice is ironic: the "smile,"

the "cordial light," do not mask for long the "pleasure" of the "Vesuvian face." Entertained by its own destructiveness, the gun-persona strikes us as horrific, even insane. The poem increasingly becomes charged with attitudes that seem less sensible and more "gun-like" (violent). The tone has become volatile and provocative.

In the fourth stanza, a voice and a metaphor alluded to earlier are clarified. Only in relationship to the sexual implications of this stanza does the initial identification begin to suggest the lover / bride. Once again, the gun claims the power to find analogies for itself. It tells us that its occupation (guard, companion, and spokesperson) is better than the sharing of the Master's bed, the "Eider--Duck's / Deep Pillow--." The gun-lover metaphor allows subtleties in the poem to emerge: the life identified (named, given identity) and carried away is a would-be bride. In "I'm Ceded--," the speaker's identity originates with but must be separated from the father. In "My Life," the speaker must struggle to free this identity from a lover, probably husband, figure.

The voice (identity) initially can only "speak" for this paternal figure. Gradually, however, the voice has become autonomous. It effects this autonomy by appropriating certain human characteristics. Although it can never be human, it can imitate its human master. It acquires a certain self-reflection, smiling about its own deadly power. It identifies its barrel end as a "Yellow Eye," its hammer as an "emphatic Thumb." By the penultimate stanza the gun, although still in the service of the master, has realized a posture at least as important as that of the master's enemies: "To foe of his--I'm deadly foe--." The gun has cultivated its own human-like potential.

It is impossible to assess the importance of this difficult poem for Dickinson herself. One is tempted to imagine the different perspectives from which Dickinson might have approached the composition. For the woman, the poem manifests the particular struggle for self-identity in a world where all identity is paternaistically determined. The violence of the poem suggests the eventual necessity for rebellion, the destruction of one way of being in the world and the replacement of that position with another. Dickinson seems to fear that the power she has secured (the power associated with voice or language) is a pure, unlimited power. We know for Dickinson the limits had yet to be determined; among women she had few precursors or models.

The final statement of the poem may be paradoxical and inaccessible:

Though I than He--may longer live
 He longer must--than I
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without the power to die--

Our speaker seems to be implying both her mortality and immortality: she tells us she has not the power to die, and yet, she asserts the necessity of the master living longer than she. The apparent demand for his immortality reflects her desperation and anxiety about her newly discovered power; "outliving" the master is simply unthinkable.

For Dickinson the agoraphobic, the unlimited (or unknown) possibilities associated with selfhood are both alluring and repellent. Self-identification begins with the gradual moving out from "Corners" into the open woods. Eventually she must abandon her passivity altogether and become her own force, her own voice. Cutting herself off from the familiar, the traditional, is a kind of home-leaving for Dickinson.

son. Once again she faces the dilemma of her phobia. Selfhood offers her the possibility of unrestricted movement, of freedom, and yet unlimited movement implies for Dickinson unpredictable chaos and disorder. Metaphorically, such freedom suggests for Dickinson destruction (explosion) and even death.

The importance of voice and articulation in the process of self-identification becomes the major concern for Dickinson the poet. The metaphoric "plot" of the poem demonstrates that a connection exists between the birth of voice and the search for self-identification. By the end of the poem, the gun is no longer a speaker for "Him"; despite its apprehension, it has found both a voice and its identity, and together they imply power. Despite Dickinson's mythic resignation, her power in language should not be considered accidental; her presence in the poem suggests activity, not passivity. Her decision to become a language-maker involves pursuit of her own personal and "obscure impulse." On another plane of responses, an anxiety very much like this impulse will drive her into the home, her real-life metaphor for security and safety from her fears. The result in the poem, "the right words in the right order," is a stay against chaos. If Dickinson's endeavor to make sense of her life results in metaphor, then the poem is, at least, the right place for metaphor.

Also in Dickinson's endeavor is, I believe, the hope that others will find her metaphors, if not articulate of their own personal experiences, at least familiar. As I have shown, Dickinson probably felt that a community with whom she could share her ambiguous perspective of the world did not exist. She may have even decided her contemporaries constituted a threat to both her personal and artistic integrity. She

may have understood, too, that writing as private as hers required, almost by definition, a reader who is always a visitor, an outsider who can never really get in. However, Dickinson recognized the power of words to endure and to find, eventually, their own audience. Indeed, a frequent theme in Dickinson's poetry (and in many of her letters) is that words, once uttered, are entrusted with a kind of immortality. "A Word that breathes distinctly," she tells us, is as "Cohesive as the Spirit / [It] has not the power to die" (J. 1651). As a result, Dickinson seems to have believed the poet owns a peculiar kind of responsibility:

A Word dropped careless on a Page
 May Stimulate an eye
 When folded in perpetual seam
 The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
 We may inhale Despair
 At distances of Centuries
 From the Malaria--

(J. 1261)

We can only speculate about the kind of audience Dickinson might have imagined for her poems. In this readership, she hoped, perhaps, to find security and stimulation. In their responses she might have anticipated relief from the anxiety, boredom, and anonymity that surely were felt as part of her life. Certainly, she must have hoped for affirmation of her own experiences of a world she often found chaotic, inimical, and in some respects alien. Eventually, of course, Dickinson's poetry does find its sympathetic audience, readers who are rather like the poet herself. In the starkness of her poems, they will recognize the scarcity that makes dear their own existence. In the ambiguities of her language, they will hear the echoes of their own words; they will recognize their own frustration with a language that

is only nearly articulate. They will applaud her ironies and chance-taking, her decision to delight in language's shortcomings. Most important is the sense of a shared exile. Ironically, Dickinson's loneliness, failures, and fears will leap time, "at distances of Centuries," to speak to audiences struck with a similar contagion, to readers whose own unique experiences, like Dickinson's, are quite literally unspeakable.

Notes

- ¹ T. S. Eliot, The Three Voices of Poetry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 9.
- ² Eliot, p. 33.
- ³ Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells Boktryckere AB, 1968), p. 26.
- ⁴ Johnson, The Letters, p. xx.
- ⁵ "To Mrs. Samuel Bowles," about August 1861, Letter 235.
- ⁶ Johnson, The Letters, p. xx.
- ⁷ Sewall, p. 331.
- ⁸ "To Abiah Root," late 1850, Letter 39.
- ⁹ "To Abiah Root," late 1850, Letter 39.
- ¹⁰ "To T. W. Higginson," 16 August 1870, Letter 342a.
- ¹¹ "To Clara Turner," 1874, Letter 425.
- ¹² Sewall, p. 554.
- ¹³ David Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 9.
- ¹⁴ "To T. W. Higginson," July 1862, Letter 268.
- ¹⁵ Sewall, p. 216.
- ¹⁶ Sewall, p. 216.
- ¹⁷ Sewall, p. 217.
- ¹⁸ Rich, p. 106.

- 19 Weisbuch, p. 59.
- 20 Cody, p. 310.
- 21 Cody, p. 311.
- 22 Cody, p. 333.
- 23 Sewall, p. 240.
- 24 Eliot, p. 28.
- 25 James Olney, Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 22.
- 26 Olney, p. 22.
- 27 Gerald Manly Hopkins, Sermons and Devotional Writings (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 123.
- 28 "To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson)," 15 January 1854, Letter 154.
- 29 Lindberg-Syersted, p. 33.
- 30 Porter, The Art, p. 170.
- 31 Lindberg-Syersted, p. 174.
- 32 Pollak, p. 150.
- 33 Weisbuch, p. 33.
- 34 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 209.
- 35 Rich, p. 66.
- 36 Porter, The Modern Idiom, 209.

A "QUIET NONCHALANCE":
WORDS AND THE WAYS DICKINSON USES THEM

Critics generally agree that Dickinson's poetic authority is distinguished by her unusual manipulation of words. R. P. Blackmur urged us to recognize that

The greatness of Emily Dickinson ... is going to be found in the words she used and in the way she put them together.... Our knowledge of implication and inkling, quite as much as our knowledge of bold sound and singing sense, will be governed solely by what we can recognize and perhaps by a good deal that we cannot, of the poetic relations of the words--that is to say by what they make of each other.¹

Acknowledging words as the focus of a poet's accomplishment may be, of course, unnecessary. The right word for the right place is not a new demand made of the poet. The subtlety of metaphor certainly requires at least well-paced language, the synchronization of words and thoughts. Blackmur implies that the power of suggestion, "implication and inkling," is a result of word-chemistry, "what [words] make of each other." One might offer the further possibility that the successful poem often accomplishes a kind of irony which depends upon the disruption or breakdown of language's predictability. The "failure" of expectation and definition can also effect the satisfaction of surprise, the freshness of new and yet legitimate associations. Perhaps we fail to recognize, as Blackmur has noticed, all the equations of the poem simply because the words never seem completely finished with one another. By responding and adapting to the peculiarities and pitches of one another, the words

allow us to experience the poem. Even though these relationships may seem oblique and inexplicable, they can advance a sense of order.

The disposition of words to work successfully and yet in a sense perversely with one another seems to fascinate Emily Dickinson. Her obsession with language, however, implies neither extraordinarily vigorous nor exotic vocabularies. Instead, her poetry consistently demonstrates a delight with the relatively common word uncommonly spent, the aberrant association, the part of speech which sometimes seems obliged to labor under unusual decisions. David Porter has appropriately labeled Dickinson's habit "subversive," a revolt against the "stirling reasonableness of language."² These violations, the "chief activating strength of an otherwise conventional vocabulary," distinguish Dickinson; they are, as Porter suggests, "among the points where she exercised her freedom, separated her voice from others of the age...."³

The most significant historical and literary fact of Dickinson's rebellion remains, of course, the isolation in which it occurs. Certainly in some ways Dickinson does resemble her contemporaries in American Romanticism. Her writing demonstrates the same overbearing individualism. In Dickinson's work, too, we discover the curiously felt absence of Calvinistic certainty, an absence which implies a burden finally rejected but which also portends an emptiness of truly cosmic dimensions. We should be cautious, however, lest we mistakenly identify Dickinson's milieu as her preoccupation; the principal business of her poetry concerns neither tradition nor the subversion of tradition. Unlike the rebellion of some of her contemporaries, Dickinson's appears to be almost accidental. Both Dickinson and Melville, for example, certainly seem to address a similar angst:

Theirs is a curious parallel, surely: the world traveler and the shut-in; the writer of sprawling epics and the composer of delicate and almost fragile lyric poetry; the enraged howling at God's silence and the ironist whose chief weapon against God was the sly, demure thrust. Yet beneath these undeniable differences, one sees a shared tendency to raise questions, a shared failure to find the answers, and a shared tragic outlook. The cosmic issues that face Melville's protagonists strongly resemble the ones that are grappled with in Miss Dickinson's poetry. Nor are the motives that launch his characters on long, abortive voyages after understanding basically unlike the impulses that sent her upstairs in her fruitless quest for escape. The₄ correspondence does exist, for all its seemingly unlikelihood....⁴

Despite the apparent "correspondence" between the two writers, Dickinson's scope is, I believe, neither "cosmic" nor "tragic." I can find underlying her poetics no "philosophical framework" that represents, as one critic has recently suggested, a choice from among the many "philosophical options available to her [as a nineteenth-century American writer]."⁵ Dickinson is neither concerned with nor do her words strictly reflect "cosmic issues"; her concerns are instead intensely private, and the vast difference between cosmic and personal issues discourages a philosophical gloss of her work. Dickinson's most philosophic contemporary, Emerson, encourages his generation, specifically its writers, to acknowledge the world as its personal symbol. "The world," he proclaims, "is emblematic, [and] the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind."⁶ Many writers of his generation work sedulously to uncover, or to create, the individualized metaphors and symbols of the world. Melville, we know, goes to sea and finds a universe governed not by fixed laws but by the infinite variation of human perspective, a variation which must, he discovers, legitimately include even madness.

Perhaps Dickinson, too, might have struggled for a wider focus on the world had not the accidental circumstance of agoraphobia prevented

her. (God, eternity, and faith do frequently occur in her poems, but they serve her metaphors more often than they serve her themes.) We should keep in mind that Dickinson's agoraphobia does not cease the moment she sits down to write poetry. Her hypersensitivity to the environment and her place within that environment, her obsession with the metaphor of the house and all the things domesticity symbolizes for her dominate both her styles of living and of writing. Dickinson rarely ventures far enough beyond her door to find a preoccupation more powerful than self-preoccupation. In both poetry and life her objective is control. She approaches language as she approaches the world at large, cautiously, selectively, and deliberately. A proclivity for words coupled with the convenience of leisure (the ironic good-fortune of her phobia) allows her to encourage words into this intimate and restricted sphere. As Porter suggests, "Dickinson's poems are in fact the places where her special reality is inserted into the otherwise familiar ground of our shared language."⁷ "Our shared language," in Dickinson's care, declares not our shared world but rather one speaker's peculiar relationship to that world. Self-expression becomes both the direction and the scope of her language.

Agoraphobia forced Dickinson into more expedient kinds of occupations than those with which her contemporaries labored, and the cataclysm upon which Dickinson concentrates will be felt through the walls, rooms, and doorways of the home, that precariously held symbol which perhaps encloses the self. However illogical the evidence for "dilapidation's process"--the crashes, crumbings, and decays which her poems so frequently address--chaos for Dickinson is both sensational and immediate. Existence and its problems cannot be defined by any remote

philosophy. Her domestic and existential misgivings are identical, and both suggest a specific problem of language. Dickinson might even choose to pronounce chaos as simply unarticulated reality: the phenomenon which strikes her as unreal demonstrates the phenomenon of failed language.

Her "funeral in the brain," as I suggest in an earlier chapter, represents this failure. The experience, which the narrator of the poem attempts to locate, remains remote. Although she convinces us of a kind of intimacy and even perhaps an understanding of the experience (she "finished knowing"), her explanation lacks a definiteness. Neither the funeral metaphor nor the language which strongly suggests the uncertain perimeters of madness (the broken "Plank in Reason," the plunge "down, and down") carries the experience. Ultimately, we are moved not by explication of the chaos but rather by the speaker's willing accommodation of chaos. Her familiarity with the experience results not in a circumscription of the episode (a definition of it) but rather an expansion: space tolls and the heavens open and ring like a bell. Paradoxically, silence looms at the end of the poem even though the narrator is surrealistically transformed by the object of its attention, becoming the "Ear" which seems to reach out and embrace the insensible clamor. Ultimately, I believe, we are left with the sense that the narrator has come to terms with her own personal chaos. Silence is the condition of language and not an indication of failed cognition: sense for her eventually breaks through, exposing "a world" at "every plunge."

For Dickinson, whose occupation suggests always a self-preoccupation, absolutes all seem to be practical, personally experienced. Distinctions between the concrete and abstract worlds may seem superfluous

to Dickinson for her world is, indeed, personally "emblematic" in a way Emerson probably could not have imagined or recognized. The unspiritual fly will appropriately "interpose" between life and death, for Dickinson finds eternity nowhere more evident than in the interminable and very real process of decay. Often in her poetry, the distinction between concrete images and abstractions collapses altogether:

"Amethyst remembrance," "Polar expiation." Neither of these exists upon the retina. Neither can be brought into focus by the muscles of the eye. The "blue and gold mistake" of Indian summer seems to exist somewhere in the visible--or would if it could only get rid of that "mistake." And so too does "The Distance / On the look or Death" and "Dying--in a different way-- / A kind behind the door." But who can describe the graphic shape of "that white sustenance / Despair"? And yet all these present themselves as images, do they not? act as images? Where can remembrance be amethyst? Where but in the eye?⁸

These images are neither strictly sensuous nor ideational. Indeed, "remembrance," "expiation," "mistake," "despair" do not "exist upon the retina." Provided, however, with appropriate modification ("amethyst," "polar"), they undergo a kind of concretion. The empirical though counterfeit "evidence" of their existence (their colors and temperatures) locates them in a way which seems immediate, using the body's sensational familiarity with the world as the material of metaphors. One never really imagines these things, but their appearances seem imminent, perhaps like something we had only forgotten and will again recall soon. The inexplicable chord which "amethyst" and "remembrance" touch in one another charges the "image" with the impression of familiarity and the power to move us.

Dickinson's talent for familiarizing the unfamiliar, her ability to bring home and to articulate (or at least to suggest) the intrin-

sically remote experience, responds to a crisis in language. The poet may have recognized the problematic relationship between her agoraphobic experience and the articulation of that experience. Indeed, "Ourself behind ourself" troubles her precisely because it seems intimate and yet so literally unutterable. Her frustration with her phobic perspective, its unreasonableness and blind spots, manifests itself specifically as a frustration with words and their inevitable weaknesses and failures. Dickinson's poems, although they often affirm the power of language, "are not intended to assert, unambiguously and without ambivalence, the ability of language to describe. Rather, they represent the tendency of language to dismember ... more rigidly and absolutely, the elements of a universe that is itself (for whatever reason) characterized by its own disunity and disjunction."⁹ Dickinson's "reason" is specifically the ambiguous constellation of experiences that would someday define the agoraphobic syndrome.

For Dickinson, language is a worrisome endeavor. She tells a friend: "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but a few and each must be chiefest, but recall the earth's most graphic transaction is placed within a syllable, nay even a gaze--"¹⁰ The comment suggests the irony of Dickinson's intention to use words mimetically. With her language, which often strikes us as chaotic and inaccessible, Dickinson strives for the honest representation of the phobic's struggle for self-articulation. Her words do not attempt to correct the anomalies of her reality: the depersonalization and derealization, the unreasonable anxiety, and the panic. Words cannot change her reality, neither can they transcribe, translate, nor make it fit. As I suggest in an earlier chapter, hers is not the utterance of consensus. Her "I" is not re-

presentative, or struggling to be representative as Emerson or Whitman struggle. Her audience will convene, more or less accidentally, only in a different century. Her poetry does not alleviate her speechlessness, and it settles nothing. Instead, the language attempts to demonstrate the struggle for self-articulation as the very syllables from the pen describe the confusion of the endeavor. If Dickinson seems to abandon the world to unreasonableness, it is only because unreasonable is the way she found the world. In some sense, therefore, Dickinson's language strives to be mimetic.

In Dickinson's worst poems, the unreasonableness of her environment and her decision to remain faithful to her peculiar encounter with the world result in inertia. Dickinson is often overwhelmed by the world, and her language often suffers from this paralysis. The poems will some time abandon the linear expectations of a clear logic; sometimes they seem to go nowhere. As Porter suggests: "It is [frequently] poetry of brilliantly concentrated firepower but with no movement forward...."¹¹ Poems become often self-conscious, even gimmicky:

One and One--are One--
Two be finished using--
Well enough for Schools--
But for Minor Choosing--

Life--just--Or Death--
Or the Everlasting--
More--would be too vast
For the Soul's Comprising--

(J. 769)

A fidelity to the difficulties of language is sacrificed to rhetoric, and a genuine uncertainty about language dissolves into obscurantism and feigned cunning. One critic, noticing that the "ornamental motif [often seems] an end to itself" in these poems, calls the style "rococo."¹²

In the best poems, however, a fidelity to experience encourages the mythic Dickinson, the eccentric recluse, to reveal herself. The critic and the cautious critic-biographer can learn from Dickinson's use of language. Quite often the words of the poem will simply demonstrate the poet's inability to respond. However, at least one critic has noted: "Dickinson [does] not regard the impotency of words as a total disadvantage."¹³ Wishing to be honest about her dilemma, the phobic Dickinson will articulate specifically the ambiguities: "the thing so terrible," "the Something odd--within--," or the ubiquitous "it" which, the poet assures us, "was not Death" (though it tasted like Death, some).

Indeed, Dickinson will often attempt to articulate even the silence. The perspectives of death and madness, so frequently exploited in her poems, identify viewpoints, were we to assume them, which would be distinguished by their unspeakable silences. A narration imprisoned by its own inarticulateness functions as the unceremonious pronouncement of death in many of the poems. When the dying narrator-chronicler of the famous fly poem (J. 465) finally proclaims, "I could not see to see," we accept her explanation as sufficient and sensible, even eloquent. Our effort, however, to explicate her meaning fails, or at least fails to credit the experience adequately. Certainly the force of her comment has something to do with the various and possible implications of the verb "to see." No doubt one of the two occurrences of the word, probably the infinitive itself, implies the animal sense of seeing. The other verb, however, moves in the direction of more figurative and less literal language, and the specific loss associated with sightlessness becomes more ambiguous. A loss of consciousness, of course, is a logical explanation, given the occasion of the poem. Nevertheless, our speaker

retains enough of some kind of consciousness to allow her to report the uncertain phenomenon. The collapse of a reliable phenomenology seems to be the event about which she is most anxious, and the repetition of the verb implies a sparsity of words appropriate to this concern. The narrator, groping for language, fails to find the specific and final word and so repeats herself. Language beyond life was thought perhaps unnecessary because language and experience were to end simultaneously, or so we were confident. (As I will show, although experience is often muted by death and dying in Dickinson's poetry, it is seldom halted. Dickinson's death poems often intimate the continuation of experience without an appreciable loss of cognition.)

Dickinson's apprehensions about the ability of language to process valuable kinds of experience subsumes all her other interests. Some of her most successful poems almost certainly deal with specific agoraphobic phenomena: "After great pain" (J. 341), "'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (J. 414), "It was not Death" (J. 510), and "I felt a Funeral" (J. 280) all suggest the paralysis of the panic experience (or after-experience). "I felt my life with both my hands" (J. 351) is typical of a number of poems which attempt, I believe, to challenge feelings of derealization:

I judged my features--jarred my hair--
 I pushed my dimples by, and waited--
 If they--twinkled back--
 Conviction might, of me--

In another poem, a sense of detachment from both the self and the environment is evidenced by the feet that "mechanical, go round," not knowing if they are "of Ground, or Air, or Ought" (J. 341). In "The first Day's Night had come"-- (J. 410), allusions are made to an am-

biguous yet episodic panic. The incident, which appears "as huge / As Yesterdays in pairs," leaves the sufferer disoriented and confused: "That person that I was-- / And this One," she tries to explain, "do not feel the same." Each of these poems implies a situation which is overwhelming: "[It] unrolled its horror in my face-- / Until it blocked my eyes." Each suggests the ill-defined and seemingly relentless episode which is "most like" (but not exactly like) the sparless boat set adrift upon chaos. Most suggestive of Dickinson's phobia, the characteristic which distinguishes her style as well as her themes, is the sense of pervasive and nonnegotiable anxiety: the ominous "sirocco" which crawls across the flesh, the feet "treading--treading" across the brain (J. 280) or the interminable "Hour of Lead" (J. 341).

We should not assume, however, that every Dickinson poem directly addresses agoraphobic phenomena. Such an assumption would belabor much of the poetry and offer contrived and much too convenient solutions. The poems as well as many of the letters demonstrate a perspective dominated by uncertainty and skepticism. A willful eccentricity which emerges as a kind of inflection throughout her language suggests hesitation and anxiety. Agoraphobia might be regarded as a kind of accent heard in her work: even when she turns her attention away from her "home," its special influence can be detected. Her obsession with control and freedom and the concomitant concern about confinement and expansion exhaust her artistic as well as her domestic hours.

Dickinson may find the unusual domesticity of her life overwhelming, but at times she also finds it attractive: "so appalling it Exhilarates--/ So over Horror, it half Captivates--" (J. 410). Often she seems more fascinated than frightened, drawn to the mysteries her

metaphors imply. Sometimes these metaphors are strangely non-analogous, for the horror with which she is obsessed has no legitimate stimulus that Dickinson ever manages to locate in the real world. However, the poet is always in pursuit, and the language which would confront the non-analogous situation demonstrates its own irresolutions. Dickinson demands the recognition of the inconsistencies of language and these inconsistencies actively participate in her poems. The subversion of word-reliability and the combining of heterogeneous and incongruous meanings reflect the indefinite and ambiguous world.

Rather than defining experience, Dickinson will often discuss its scope and intensity. "'Tis Opposites," she assures us, "that entice" (J. 355), and her opposites, which often involve such novel reconsiderations of reality, are enticing. Sometimes they demand the acceptance of unusual oppositions: "Earth is short-- [and] Anguish absolute" (J. 315); the "Possibility" that surely finds a most peculiar opposite in "prose." Probably nothing could be more "enticing" than Dickinson's "Deformed Men [who] ponder / Grace--" (J. 355). The image at first appears to be incongruous: our sense of definition, of reason, perhaps of propriety might have demanded that grace and deformity remain irreconcilable. With further consideration, however, we find the situation legitimate enough. What could be more natural, or more emphatic, that the graceless (or ungraceful-appearing) man's regard of grace? Furthermore, our initial shock or hesitation proves self-revealing, exposing our own preconceptions about the world and about what language can say. What, if anything, is the presumable connection in our observation between the "form" and "grace" of these men? Perhaps our prejudices are even reinforced by what we unconsciously expect and mistakenly hear in the words them-

selves: deformed men "pondering" grace might suggest the paradox of a "ponderous" grace. Throughout Dickinson's poetry, new word associations are offered and expected associations are challenged, and often collapse. Language, and not necessarily experience, is on trial. Dickinson's unusual appropriation of words often accomplishes the uneasy orchestration of things not quite belonging together in the real world. In a sense she creates, if not a new reality, then a new perspective on reality which did not exist before the words were encouraged to cooperate, or to confront one another, in the way Dickinson apparently knew they could.

If Dickinson's language so frequently abandons expectation and logic, we are obliged to ask what distinguishes it from babble and nonsense. These are poems, a critic rapidly discovers, about which one does not write easily. Reading and again re-reading the poems, one feels increasingly more comfortable with her work as genuine poetic experience but also increasingly more reluctant to define or even to speculate about its workmanship. Often the reader can point to the place where the words work well but cannot articulate how they work. Dickinson herself provides us the metaphor for this dilemma: her poetry is a "house" of "Possibility" (J. 657). With its "Chambers [of] Cedars" and its "Everlasting Roof," it is a true structure, but as the poet confidently asserts, it is also "impregnable." The poems often reject an obvious logic and explication but, nonetheless, do reflect some specific contingencies and decisions and the authority of the poet. For example, Dickinson uses the strange or exotic symbol to create curious moments of psychological immediacy: "Our lives are Swiss" (J. 80), "Vesuvius at Home" (J. 1705), "An Ethiop within" (J. 422). She is

drawn, I believe, to the magic of paradox because it allows her her contradictions: her "organized Decays" and the "Ruin [which] is formal" (J. 977); the "Bliss like Murder" (J. 379). Dickinson's work suffers from a lack of editing at times (as readers are often quick to notice), but the words generally seem carefully choreographed.

In a specific group of poems, Dickinson's strange and even grotesque practices of language reflect the agoraphobic's frustration with a language that fails certain legitimate experiences. Dissatisfied with the complacencies of language, Dickinson manipulates vocabularies in order to subvert expectations; her words depart markedly from what might be considered their natural linguistic obligations. At times absurd and incongruous, this group of poems describes an obviously caricatured experience of the world. Two kinds of dictions, or treatments of diction, distinguish the limits of her grotesque style, the two poles of her frustration. The styles seem to be informed by the different and sometimes incompatible orientations of the agoraphobic lifestyle. Each viewpoint, as I imply early in this work, resonates with its own motif. The death motif responds to and exaggerates her obsession with concealment (masking); the madness motif responds to her desire for freedom and suggests the extreme consequence of this freedom. The metaphors may be either stated or implied within the poem's fiction. Death, for instance, often shows itself in a preoccupation with decay; madness may be inferred from an occasion of non-specific disorientation or cosmic disorder. Using the two intrinsically unutterable viewpoints, Dickinson captures in metaphor the essence of the agoraphobic frustration with language.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will look specifically at Dickinson's "Gothicism" and how it reflects her phobic preoccupation with

language. The Gothic trope and its supporting diction represent one kind of utterance, or attempted utterance, about the world. The style itself is a kind of metaphor of the agoraphobic articulation. It emphasizes the concealment, masking, and ritual inherent in both the world and language. It often seems superficial; even as it blatantly insinuates a terror beneath the surface, the Gothic style fails to produce true terror: the Gothic analogy is never consummated. The trope and its treatment fail to carry the experience, and the horror intrinsic to the occasion becomes, at best, the caricature of horror. Indicative of the phobic's experience with language, the words neither disimprison the narrator of the poem nor effectively reveal her situation.

The Gothic style of Dickinson's poetry is distinguished by its conspicuously inelegant subject matter. Although death ironically appears unobtrusive in many of these poems, with a "quiet nonchalance" (J. 194), at the heart of Dickinson's metaphor lies the awful essence of death: the reality of decay. As one critic has correctly observed, the "'picture' represented by the corpse in Dickinson's poems ... is seldom an attractive one."¹⁴ David Porter minimizes the importance of death in the poems. It is, he maintains, simply

the theme of much popular literature and one [Dickinson] substituted for experience of her own in the outside world. Death was the topic of letters, of gossip, of day-to-day social intercourse. It was what one talked about.... She employed death in the way people use the weather as an excuse for communicating.¹⁵

Porter's thesis eventually leads him to the conclusion that Dickinson uses death as "the occasion for her language performance."¹⁶ In his generally fine attempt to identify Dickinson as a pre-modern poet, Porter hurries over her "non-referential" language, ignoring the im-

portant choices of words and metaphors. Death provides Dickinson not simply the opportunity to demonstrate a verbal gymnastics. It allows her to confront symbolically some of the paradoxes and undefined spaces of her own agoraphobic position:

[Dickinson] must ponder death through completely mature eyes for the simple reason that there is no pretense which can minimize the terrors of the corpse--and no averting of the eye which will blind one to the dilemmas and uncertainties that the corpse elicits.¹⁷

Dickinson's own unpronounced motive for so frequently using this motif may even echo Emerson's observation: "[Death] is always astounding; our philosophy never reaches, never possesses it; we are always at the beginning of our catechism; always the definition is yet to be made. What is death."¹⁸

Strangely enough the style of these important poems often uses somewhat cliched and simplistic metaphors of death. Initially the effect would seem dependent upon stock vocabularies and romanticized situations which are themselves sentimental, even silly: the "goblins" and "ghosts"; the "Alabaster Chambers" of the grave; the abbey's gallop; the helpless, beheaded flower. The hackneyed and obvious image produces a kind of humor or parody, and the seriousness of concealment which the Gothic trope assumes never develops. The legitimacy of the terror remains unconvincing. The apprehensiveness and anxiety of the situation give way to the apprehensiveness associated with language. Even when the language seems confidently responsive to a situation, ambiguities which the words reveal in each other serve to uncover an underlying ambivalence.

In some of the death poems we learn immediately of the chaos, the crumbling foundation and the steady decay beneath the apparently reason-

ble and often attractive surface. Although the poem is ambiguous enough to allow several readings, the diction and the careful emplacement of the subject imply a probable death vigil attended by the narrator-witness:

Her face was in a bed of hair,
 Like flowers in a plot--
 Her hand was whiter than the sperm
 That feeds the sacred light.
 Her tongue more tender than the tune
 That totters in the leaves--
 Who hears may be incredulous,
 Who witnesses, believes.

(J. 1722)

The final lines of the poem provide the basic issue about which the poem proper develops: the difference between merely hearing and witnessing may be as significant as the difference between incredulity and belief. Eventually the distinctions between surface and depth, life and decay, even perhaps between articulation and mere reflex, prove uneven.

The description of the scene suggests the subject's motionlessness, which will be, to the surprise of the narrator, interrupted only by the unexpected "tune." The careful and unnaturally static arrangement of the hair about the face not only implies the subject in repose but also prefigures the body after death. The "flowers" and "plot" intimate the "bed" into which the body will eventually be committed. The death-white hands and the voice that "totters" further complement the deathness of the scene. Indeed, the initial observation may now seem ironic: the "face in a bed of hair" describes the face of a woman in a real bed who is fated before long to yet a third and more final kind of "bed."

We are not, of course, shocked by the topic, for Dickinson's work and romantic literature in general familiarize death. A surrender of

life shows itself in the dying woman's face. In this particular poem, however, the repose is fallacious: beneath the serenity of the body, a struggle of life continues which will briefly but powerfully declare itself in the woman's utterance. The poet refuses to allow language prettily to conceal death or even to distinguish it from life: the flowers, symbol of both life and beauty, also serve as an accoutrement of death; the whiteness of the skin logically suggests both a kind of feminine perfection and a death pallor. We are shocked, therefore, not by the subject of the poem (death) but by the inability of language even to distinguish it from its traditionally assumed antithesis (life). Often Dickinson refuses to cooperate with expectation (particularly with the ritual of death) in order to reveal the chaos such ritual pretends to manage. In this particular poem, the ritual includes not merely the death vigil but language itself. Dickinson's dying subject may suggest some of the paradoxes of language. Her struggle to articulate her situation proves insufficient, a "tottering" attempt at expression. Nonetheless, the sound itself manages to articulate and to confirm the vitality of the subject, the life still struggling beneath the deathly calm surface.

The symmetrical and gradual presentation of the poem's subject reinforces the apparent reasonableness of the ritual. Each successive pair of lines functions as an informational unit. The first two lines provide the image of the face; the second, the hands; and the third, the voice (the "tongue"). The poet, however, also employs this technique to disrupt order: the ambiguities or paradoxes of the words within each pair of lines introduce conflicts that challenge the complacencies of the ritual. In the first image, the poet has forced beauty into an

unexpected alliance with both life and death: as we have seen, the flowers respond metonymically to both conditions. A kind of convexity and concavity is also introduced in these lines and will prefigure the movement into (or the filling up of) the grave which the "bed" portends and which will be the destiny of the subject to correct. Frequently in Dickinson's Gothic poetry, delicate surfaces both identify life and imperfectly camouflage the indelicacy beneath.

Intrinsic ambiguities associated with the quality of whiteness subvert the ritualistic expectations of language and death in the second pair of lines. The "whiter hand" responds to the implication of color ("flowers") introduced in the opening lines. The anatomical association between hand and face further reinforces the structure. The integrity of the ritual, however, is threatened by these relationships. The white hand offers at least the possibility of a white face; no longer can the vitality of the subject be assumed. Dickinson intends, no doubt, for the "sperm / That feeds the sacred light" to refer literally to that part of the flame closest to the wick and socket, that part which is both white and generative (near, or related to, the source). The long "i" in both "whiter" and "light" reinforces the association. More important is the reinforcement of the whiteness of the hand through its paradoxical relationship to the vital (sperm-fed) and sacred light. The departure of life draws the hue from the hand, a hand which has been successfully linked to engenderation: "the sacred light."

The narrator's witnessing of death, the meticulous observations of the dying woman's body, isolates her. With a curious detachment and her voice surprisingly restrained, she searches for the right metaphor and the right superlative that might capture the significance of what

she has learned. The last two lines, however, imply a more profound experience than the words ever manage to sound: "Who hears may be incredulous, / Who witnesses, believes." The concluding lines are nearly expressionless, a speech that seems too mundane and almost borrowed. Her attempt to articulate and to share the experience distorts it, reduces it to the commonplace, the adage that sounds too familiar to be effective. The speaker's restraint does not imply affectation (or repression) as much as an unobliging language.

The narrator may not be the only character of the poem isolated by an unobliging language. With the penultimate pair of lines, the third and final anatomical relationship is introduced. The tongue allows conclusions to be made: the woman in repose also seems to be involved in a crude kind of language-making. Ironically, her "speech" may prove more successful than her observer's. The language of the woman in repose literally accommodates or articulates the self, for her utterance declares her life, her vitality. Only now do we know that she lives, that she is not simply the corpse laid out for ritualistic viewing. Her "self"-articulation shocks the narrator; the incredulous "speech" and the "witnessing" of that speech make of our narrator a believer. The tune "that totters in the leaves" does not suggest necessarily speech or even the attempt at speech (the tottering sound making its way through the unsteady leaves). The sound emitted by the woman may simply indicate a reflex associated with dying. The distinction becomes perhaps irrelevant, for the sound itself effectively disturbs the ritual: it is a motion that advises the narrator not to mistake paralysis for rigor mortis. The difficulty of distinguishing life from death has been demonstrated. When we talk about death, the poet shows us, we can do

so only in terms of life and with analogies to life. Life, however, is specific and concrete, like flowers, while death is only approached abstractly. The subject's death, or dying, is not merely a negation of life or the absence of life; it is a something (what?) in its own right. The terror which the poem ultimately addresses is not the Gothic preoccupation with death but rather the incomparable situation, the experience so profoundly unique that it resists even analogy. The struggle for metaphor becomes, therefore, the focus of the poem. The poet's experience with language is reflected, I believe, not only in the narrator's struggle for metaphor but also in the dying subject's struggle for any sound that might declare her being.

Death, as I have suggested, interests Dickinson because it is so unutterable. She regards both death and her phobia as legitimate realities and wishes, somehow, to capture this legitimacy using her language. The lifelessness of the subject suggests a kind of paralysis common in Dickinson's work; it is a kind of paralysis that Dickinson may have associated with agoraphobic speech: the tongue continues, but the speech does not articulate her experience. Instead, we hear a kind of parodic speech: the parody may only poorly imitate, but the act itself becomes significant. The dying character provides Dickinson an interesting symbol because her "speech," emitted from the border between life and death, participates in both worlds. Metonymically it announces both life and death; it is both sensible (audible) and insensible (unintelligible). (We might recall that the last "word" heard on this side of the grave in one of Dickinson's most famous death poems is the "blue buzz" of a clumsy and confused fly, Dickinson's awful but funny harbinger of death.)

In another of Dickinson's death vigils, the gradual decay of the corpse is accompanied by the gradual failure of the vigilant to maintain intimacy with, or even to recognize, her dead companion. A sense of her alienation is accomplished by a progressively more idiosyncratic use of language. As the body becomes less familiar, less vital, the language becomes more bold and the tone more suggestive of the speaker's frustration. With the final ambiguous "adamant," we are persuaded to recognize the narrator's ambivalence about the dead subject:

'Twas warm--at first--like Us--
 Until there crept upon
 A Chill--like frost upon a Glass--
 Till all the scene--be gone.

The Forehead copied Stone--
 The Fingers grew too cold
 To ache--and like a Skater's Brook--
 The busy eyes--congealed--

It straightened--that was all--
 It crowded Cold to Cold--
 It multiplied indifference--
 As Pride were all it could--

And even when with Cords--
 'Twas lowered, like a Weight--
 It made no Signal, nor demurred,
 But dropped like Adamant.

(J. 519)

Initially the observer has no problem relating to the corpse: "'Twas warm ... like Us." The metaphorization is imagistic and vivid; the "scene" has recorded the empirical changes of the body's surface: the "Skater's Brook," upon which the "Chill" gradually descends. Eventually the life, like the view through the frost-covered glass, disappears. The poet's extraordinary mixtures of metaphors and dictions allow the body to be compared to both the landscape (the "Skater's Brook") and a character within that landscape. The fingers aching from the cold suggest the

subject's community with other cold skaters, with the narrator herself perhaps. The "busy eyes" that eventually "congeal" might refer to both the activity of the skaters ("crowded cold to cold") and the vacancy of the stare. By the third stanza, however, the language begins to fail. The final, flawlessly executed line accomplishes what may be the poet's intention to demonstrate the predicament of the narrator. Description at this point can no longer accommodate experience; the narrator is literally at a loss for words. The understatement ("that was all") shows her desperation, but we are moved by the quiet dignity with which this desperation is expressed. At this point in the vigil, surely to say more would be to say too much.

Dickinson's manipulations of words typically discourage the formation of exclusive or contradictory groups. "'Twas warm--" moves, or is pulled, into opposite directions simultaneously, proposing both the singularity of the corpse and suggesting a kind of multiplicity. As "frost" creeps over and through the corpse, it also conceals it from the living world that once knew it, understood it. The body becomes more undifferentiated, homogenous, as it deadens. It becomes passive and ponderous: a "stone," a "weight." It "straighten[s]"; its "busy eyes--congeal." The increasing ponderousness and immobility culminate in the thud-like "adamant" which announces the drop into the grave. At the same time, however, the language used to describe the immobilization and indifference of the body seems borrowed from a species of words associated with increment, growth, and activity: the "busy eyes," "crowded cold to cold," the "multiplied indifference." Death (or decay) itself demonstrates a kind of movement: the chill that "crept," the "forehead [that] copied stone," the fingers [that] grew too cold."

More important is the poem's reliance upon concrete and ambiguous imageries, the surface and depth of Dickinson's Gothicism. As the decay increases, the speaker's understanding wanes. Analogies for the body become more difficult: the speaker no longer compares the body to "Us" or even to the "Skater's Brook." The specific details--the forehead that grows stony, the eyes that wear a film--surrender to the more non-specific observations of the body's rigor mortis. The rigor mortis that "crowded Cold to Cold," "multiply[ing]" the body's "indifference," articulates exactly, appropriately, but not concretely. The poem focuses upon realities that now seem abstracted from language: the body "dropped like Adamant" into the grave. Even though "adamant" metaphorically names the stony metamorphosis (the body has cooled and hardened and has become heavy), it also qualifies the corpse's "attitude." Refusing to give the narrator even a "Signal," the body has grown increasingly more unapproachable, arrogant, pridefully secret and silent. Indeed, "adamant" almost seems less the stone and more the quality of resistance, more adjectival than nominative. One might imagine that the decision to substitute completely the reality with a word has been avoided at the last moment. The obvious metaphor strengthens the impression less than the implied modifier does. More important that the corpse now concealed in its grave is the growing frustration of the narrator. The poem leaves us with only a trace, a quality, an indication that the "Landscape" has been undeniably but inexpressibly disturbed.

In a poem that uses one of Dickinson's most common themes, the death of a great person, the poet considers the uncertainty of existence using a language which is itself disturbingly irresolute:

More Life--went out-- when He went
 Than Ordinary Breath--
 Lit with a finer Phosphor--
 Requiring in the Quench--

A Power of Renowned Cold,
 The Climate of the Grave
 A Temperature just adequate
 So Anthracite, to live--

For some--an Amplier Zero--
 A Frost more needle keen
 Is necessary, to reduce
 The Ethiop within.

Others--extinguish easier--
 A Gnat's minutest Fan
 Sufficient to obliterate
 A Tract of Citizen--

Whose Peat Life--amply vivid--
 Ignores the solemn News
 That Popocatapel exists--
 Or Etna's Scarlets, Choose--

(J. 422)

The poem demonstrates the mercurial disposition of both language and the experience language professes to locate and stabilize. I agree with Blackmur's observation that the poem lacks "plot movement." If this lack indicates "exercise" instead of finished poem, as Blackmur maintains, it is an exercise certainly common in Dickinson's work.¹⁹ In our specific concern for the poet's use of words, we might benefit by regarding this practice as experiment instead of exercise; Dickinson's custom is to direct language toward its possibilities instead of its perfections and precisions. Definiteness implies decisions Dickinson simply refuses to make, or cannot make, about the world and language.

Blackmur often seems to feel that Dickinson errs because her language fails to assert a posture. He finds, for instance, her use of the word "anthracite" an "irresponsible product of her aptitude of language" because it fails to "denominate" which "one of [the word's] several

senses may contribute to the poem."²⁰ Dickinson is not, I think, as irresponsible as Blackmur charges (or often as lucky as he implies). When Blackmur can detect no argument, he concludes the poem lacks the "psychological force" the poet may have intended. However, Dickinson is rarely so aggressive, so obvious in her articulation, and the effectiveness of her language seems at times accomplished almost accidentally. Her "moment of Brocade" (J. 480), her "drop--or India" (J. 430), the "assault [upon] a Plush" (J. 401), and the strangely modern-sounding "Pianos in the Woods" (J. 1756) strike us as more playful than planned. A surprise in language, which the reader often seems to share with the poet herself, characterizes the effect of Dickinson's best work. Of course, the inadvertency of her utterance is an illusion, Dickinson's gift to the language. The soundlessness of those "dots--on a Disc of Snow" (J. 216) and the dramatic opening of the window, "Like a Pod" (J. 389), in the opposite house where someone has recently died are not accidental. Dickinson's unusual word associations and aggregations uncover unexpected confederations in the real world. The only certainty her poems confirm will be, ironically, the absence of stasis in the real world. Even language--particularly language--lacks the capacity to locate and to "denominate" meaning for us. Nor can language provide the stimulus for what troubles Dickinson. Despite her lifelong ambition for self-revelation, her uncertainty regarding herself remained, I believe, no less than our uncertainty regarding her. Indeed, one wonders reading her work if these poems make of each of us fools: her for attempting so strange an utterance and her readers for listening. Perhaps the pronouns without antecedents and the metaphors with their ambiguous cargo are truly without reference in the real world. This absence may be the irony of

Dickinson's language as well as her life. Her language may affirm a reality that is at best problematic or at worst no reality at all.

The occasion of Dickinson's "More Life--" is not as grisly as many of her Gothic poems. Ostensibly the language reinforces the ritualistic viewpoint of the eulogist. The sentimental language blatantly encourages the melancholy of the occasion. The beginning metaphor is obvious and predictable: the fire which has kindled the deceased's life (the "finer Phosphor") has gone out like a common match flame. The narrator's shock seems to have resulted from the realization that so unlikely a candidate for death (unlike, perhaps, the common "Citizen") has been selected. Her use of superlatives acknowledges the extraordinariness of both the victim and the death which has claimed him. The "Finer Phosphor" implies a lingering influence, a light which will continue even though sensible heat has been extinguished. Death, too, is uncommon here: an "Ampler Zero," more ominous and perhaps more indifferently than ordinary death (A "Renowned Cold").

Initially, the language of the poem cooperates with the simplicity of the occasion: life and death are distinctive, representing a definite opposition. We expect the words of the poem to reinforce this basic assumption. We may even be tempted to suppose the course the dichotomy will take through language: Life/Death, heat/cold, activity/inactivity, presence/absence. However, when we attempt to regiment the language accordingly, the basic dichotomy begins to reveal its ambiguities. Coldness and darkness, for instance, provide our narrator evidence of death. And yet, neither characteristic nor its opposite remains exclusively in death's profile: the coldness of the grave actually sustains a kind of life, the "life" of the anthracite. Furthermore, "Etna's Scarlets,"

not darkness, announce death's constant presence and awful power. The breach of our certainty begins with Dickinson's inclusion of the word "anthracite." Blackmur, whose judgment of the poem I find often difficult to accept, faults Dickinson for her use of this word; he attributes the alleged lack of integrity in the poem to the confusion "anthracite" initiates. The word demonstrates, it seems to me, Dickinson's intention to retain, and even to cultivate, the intrinsic ambiguity of language in order to challenge the absolutism which language often and erroneously confers upon experience. "Anthracite" implies the dialectical tension between life and death without resolving it. Contextually it is comfortable in both camps but belongs strictly to neither. Despite its origin in the "grave" of the earth, its potential for flame might symbolize the sustenance of life in the same way the less perfect carbon, the "peat," sustains and indicates the "Citizen." Indeed, anthracite, the object in the real world, involves much paradox. Dark and yet highly luminous, it is a cold and lifeless rock. Composed of nearly pure carbon, however, it has the potential for heat and light. Hard and yet easily combusted, it might be characterized as both durable and perishable.

"Anthracite" also introduces the poem's other major challenge, the word "Ethiop." Within the context of the poem, both words locate interiorities: the "grave" which provides a climate "just adequate" for anthracite and the Ethiop's place within. Because it implies both darkness (of skin color and perhaps the obscurity or remote places) and warmth (of climate), the "Ethiop within" symbolizes an essential or intrinsic vitality. (Dickinson may have found the word's exotic or primitive connotations useful in this respect. Often her metaphoric assess-

ment of the interior or essential self involves such interesting speculations: "that polar privacy," "the 'Undiscovered Continent'," a "Power of Butterfly," the soul that feels itself "get ripe.") Paradoxically, the implication of primitive and buried power associated with the essence of life (the "Ethiop within") seems remarkably suited to an image of death. Furthermore, both life and death are realized with light symbols: the "finer Phosphor" of the great life and the volcanic anticipation of death. Both the specific life and death share a tenacious vitality, and each establishes its own kind of presence within the poem.

Neither the diction nor the apparent effect the poet wishes to create is simple. Each time we look at the words, we perhaps discover or choose different possibilities. Although "antracite" and "Ethiop" are the sources of the poem's ambiguities and paradoxes, other word associations further support the complications. In the oxymoron "Amplifier Zero," existence (that which can be compared, the amplifier zero) and non-existence (the zero) both compete with and reinforce each other's meaning. Furthermore, "Breath," a logical metonym for life, has a subtle metaphorical relationship with death in the poem: a small but genuine association exists between "breath" and the "gnat's minutest Fan," the agent of death for the average "Citizen."

The most important function of language in the poem is to suggest discrepancies between appearances and reality. Once again, Dickinson's preoccupation with surface and depths, with ritual and its function, dominate the operation of language. The legitimacy of the assumed motive of the narrator and, more important, the honesty of the eulogy itself become suspect. Homage to the deceased is paid, certainly. However the commonplace, too, receives genuine though perhaps suppressed

attention. The "citizen," the "ordinary breath" (presumably the eulogist's own breath), the "temperature just adequate" all suggest the unexceptional life. Although the poem begins as a requiem for the "great dead," the attention irreversibly shifts back toward those of us whose fires burn with a less distinguished flame. Ironically a use of language that specifically demands selflessness, the ritualistic eulogy, reveals and is eventually dominated by the speaker's own egotism. Ritual has provided the facade which both conceals the self and suggests self-pre-occupation.

Perhaps the most interesting use of self-concealment and self-pre-occupation in Dickinson's Gothicism employs a kind of spying or small-town "voyeurism" in the narration:

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today--
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have--always--

The Neighbors rustle in and out--
The Doctor--drives away--
A window opens like a Pod--
Abrupt--mechanical--

Somebody flings a Mattress out--
The Children hurry by--
They wonder if it died--on that--
I used to--when a Boy--

The Minister--goes stiffly in--
As if the House were His--
And He owned all the Mourners--now--
And little Boys--besides--

And then the Milliner--and the Man
Of the Appalling Trade--
To take the measure of the House--

There'll be that Dark Parade--

Of tassels--and of Coaches--soon--
It's easy as a Sign
The Intuition of the News--
In just a Country Town-- (J. 389)

Although the first line resounds with suggestion of rumor and community, the narration avoids the tendency toward consensual experience. Opposite and perhaps above the activity, our narrator sits conspicuously out of the scene. Her own activity seems preoccupied with the discovery of facts and clues. With reportorial detachment, she notices the specific movements of the doctor and neighbors. The specialized work of the milliner and mortician further informs the occasion. She recognizes the same "numb look" that such places always wear when someone has died, and the children's curiosity about the particulars of death reminds her of her own childhood wonder in the presence of death. Her report of the event cannot be faulted for any apparent bias or effusiveness. The details seem exact and sequentially faithful. The sense of context, the small "Country Town," in which death has occurred has been maintained. Given the seriousness of the ritual in this small community, the observation suggests remarkable objectivity. Judgments are delayed if not avoided; when facts inevitably lead to conclusions, they demonstrate a logic which assumes its own rightness, existing independent of the narrator.

Inexplicably, the mundane details will provide us with our most convincing "news." The narrator will eventually boast that her prediction of the forthcoming "Dark Parade" (the funeral) was as "easy as a Sign--." "Intuition," as the poet seems to recognize, is inextricably tied to the surface of things. The effectiveness of the poem itself will depend, as we shall see, upon our own recognition of the right signs. The poem encourages the use of intuition; we eventually know things about the town, the deceased, and perhaps even about the unobtrusive narrator which were not exactly told to us.

Although Dickinson's narrator professes and demonstrates an interest in the "signs" of her environment, she proves most eloquent as a creator of signs herself. The most subtle and important of her "signs" is the metaphor of the house which the narrator discusses in lieu of the corpse itself. The extended metaphor dominates the otherwise prosaic language of the poem, the somewhat mundane though authentic-sounding "Country Town" bulletin. The ritual which envelops the house suggests the ritualized treatment of the dead occupant. We remember that the house wears a "numb look"; the mortician and milliner, the narrator tells us, have come to "take the measure of the house," not of the deceased. The self-important minister acts "as if the House [the dead occupant] were [now] his." As God's proxy within the community (and as his metonym within the poem), the minister does, in fact, have the right which the narrator refuses to recognize. The specific use of metaphoric language informs the occasion with information that detail alone cannot. Although the narrator's detachment allows a certain amount of objectivity, it does not afford her omniscience, for she never really enters the house. She can make only a superficial examination of the dead man's situation, a record that describes the surface of things: the activities which surround and often originate from within the house, a record of what goes in and what comes out. The interior of the house, the space that presumably identifies the essence of the occupant, conspicuously resists her conclusions.

Nonetheless, her presence itself suggests something about the truth beneath, or rather behind, the surface or ritual. The aloofness of the narrator implies the ironic distance of the provincial gossip, a harmless "Country Town" voyeurism. Her point of view requires

a kind of involvement of its own: the self-conscious step back from the scene, the pretense of objectivity, the ritual of concealment. A scene described from this perspective assumes masquerade; neither the observer nor the focus of the observation is obvious or visible. We should not be surprised to find this perspective often in Dickinson's poems, for Dickinson's involvement with the world shares much with the voyeur's; both enjoy a vicarious participation. The apparently unobtrusive observer controls the observation, and her own motives are instrumental to the scene upon which she looks. The mask (or cover or surface) behind which she hides assures the advantage of anonymity. This perspective seems to accommodate Dickinson's own peculiar skepticism, her conviction that appearances often conceal some awful reality. Although the observer's detachment is real, it conceals the irresistible impulse to discover what lies beneath the surface, what informs and supports and gives the surface its shape. For Dickinson, the voyeur or spy is almost emblematic: she represents the consummate metaphor-maker. Her analogies and metaphors speak of both facade and essence, appearance and the implication of appearance.

The voyeur-narrator of "There's been a Death" reports the ritual and yet her language, ironic and often darkly humorous, suggests something more. Her linguistic gamesmanship reveals an irreverence inappropriate to the ritual. The "stiffly" moving minister officiates at this preparation for the dead, and the "Man of the Appalling Trade" is, of course, the mortician, the man who trades in palls. "That Dark Parade," certainly an adequate metaphor for the funeral, nonetheless, may bother us. In a poem that recognizes the points of view of "little Boys" and curious "Children" (the narrator herself often demonstrates

a childish insistence), "parade" may invite an inappropriate suggestion of frivolity. When an anonymous "Somebody" suddenly and irreverently "flings a Mattress out--" (that mattress), we nearly miss the subtle but awful significance of the gesture.

The house, the metaphor which carries the woman's presence (or rather, as we shall see, her absence) through the poem, has been invaded with life. Mindless and almost virulent in its intensity, the community "rustles in and out." At some point, there is simply no longer room for death: "A Window opens like a Pod-- / Abrupt--mechanical--." The image, the single most important passage of the poem, transforms the scene. Implicitly sexual, the activity (unlike the previous movements of the community) suggests health, vigor, and strength. The fullness and explosiveness of the pod, the implication of seed and sowing, assist this dramatic change; something seems to have been set in motion by the opening of the "pod." The poem that we thought was about death is also about life. The metaphoric handling of the life, however, may shock us. The mechanical movement of the ritualistic activity, the swinging wide of the window, offers the possibility that life is neither as deliberate nor as precious as we had perhaps hoped. Activity stubbornly goes on. Mechanical and abrupt, life and death spasmodically discharge their obligations without distinction.

Striking as usual in its absence in a Dickinson poem is any indication of grief or even sympathy. Even though the body apparently has not been removed from the house (the milliner, mortician, and minister still move about the scene and the doctor has just left), the poem fails to acknowledge the deceased. She is neither eulogized nor missed. Traces of grief appear nowhere in this observation of the preparation for her

formal interment. Throughout the poem, she has remained somewhere within the poem; we have approached only as close as the metaphoric house has allowed. Curiosity (our as well as the community's) and not grief dominates the experience: the children "wonder," the apian neighbors scurry in and out, the narrator herself watches dispassionately. In the same way that the implicitly sexual imagery subverted our expectations of this ritual, so, too, does the pervasive albeit innocent inquisitiveness of the town. An uninteresting "it," the deceased has been afforded little respect. The community demonstrates an impatience with the ritual, a desire to be done with it and with her: they "rustle" or "hurry by," they "drive away," and they "fling" things from windows. Their motives often appear egocentric: the minister uses the occasion to demonstrate his authority, the children are merely curious, and the narrator seizes the opportunity to display her cleverness ("It's as easy as a Sign"). The death has become only slightly more important than the metaphoric house-cleaning; fulfilling ritualistic obligations to the dead implies a kind of sweeping away.

In the act of reporting the community's experience, the narrator ironically accomplishes more than she intended to accomplish. Although she fails to participate actively in the ritual, her words penetrate its duplicity. She predicts with confidence "that Dark Parade." We, however, will recognize the parade for the masquerade, or charade, which it really is. The ornamentation, the "tassles" and "coaches," conceals literally nothing. We have witnessed the cortege which has preceded the "Dark Parade"; we know the woman who will be removed from the house no longer exists. The empty gesture of the funeral will have less to say than the anonymous discard of the mat-

tress, the one image of the poem that manages to articulate something of the awful insignificance of her passing.

Moments of such sudden awareness frequently occur in Dickinson's poetry. Clark Griffith's specific analysis of another of Dickinson's poems, "'Twas like a Maelstrom" (J. 414), might be applicable to a general discussion of these moments. With the final stanza, Dickinson intends, according to Griffith, to create the "terror of irresolution."²¹ The four previous stanzas have created the anxiety of a condemned prisoner whose possible reprieve has become the object of play and indecision for an insidious "goblin" (and also, as the poem seems to imply, for an insidious God). In the penultimate stanza, the prisoner is led "from Dungeon's luxury of Doubt / To Gibbets, and the Dead--." With the final stanza, however, the "Fiend" grants the prisoner a stay of execution:

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped 'Reprieve'!
Which Anguish was the utterest--then--
To perish, or to live?

The stay fails to alleviate the prisoner's "anguish": perhaps she knows the reprieve will be only temporary, or perhaps the experience has proved so devastating that she simply refuses to risk life further. In any case, she faces a profound anguish, the irony of a life worse than death. Griffith comments on the poem's lack of resolution:

She poses us finally upon the sharp edge of an ironical attitude. There are no statements in the end; there is only a question. As the poem in its earlier stages had hovered between doom and reprieve, so at the last, we are left with [a] harrowing uncertainty....²²

The use of the Gothic motif in Dickinson's poetry often produces such moments of apparent uncertainty, offering the question and not the

answer. I believe, however, Dickinson poses such questions only rhetorically. The poem's resolution neither demands nor needs an answer. The orchestration of the setting in the final stanza might persuade us to find the "terror of irresolution" in the language which cannot successfully place the experience in our frame of reference. The language, not the experience, refuses resolution. The words actually subvert the logic of the setting. The prisoner is led up from the dungeon, up to the dead. In a literal sense, the movement proceeds as perhaps expected: the "Gibbets" are above ground; they no doubt dominate the surface. The language, however, creates incongruities: the prisoners leave their subterranean cells to become the dead who will dominate attention at the surface level. The disorientation will culminate in the perversion of the prisoner's own perspective and attitude: life and death will no longer demonstrate such a simple dichotomy. A kind of death occurs before the prisoner reaches the gallows, possibly during the transition. Her eyes are "stitched" with a "film" before the reprieve is granted.

Language in Dickinson's poems demonstrates its own contradictions and seems unable or unwilling to go beneath the surface of certain profound experiences. The "terror of irresolution" results not from the situation but from the language, the words that become so overwhelmed, so indecisive that they can produce only stutter or silence. We might hope that words could accomplish more, perhaps secure reality for us, give it a name. Dickinson recognizes that such management might prove impossible. Articulation, at some point, begins to break down, and language begins to confuse and even fail experience.

Death then becomes for Dickinson the logical perspective from which to speak. "Repeatedly [Dickinson] emphasizes the remoteness of

the dead, their 'arrogance'."²³ The "remoteness" of the dead is the "remoteness" of the profound experience. The language which must confront such occasions often, as we have seen, dissolves into abstraction. When we think something important is about to be spoken, there is only silence or a senseless "buzz." When we think that we ourselves might finally speak "it," our voice "totters." If, however, Dickinson's language cannot uncover or unveil the surface, it will succeed through suggestion. The words will leave us with "implication and inkling." The Gothic metaphor allows Dickinson a position from which to consider the special phenomenon, that moment or space or "heave between storms" when both language and experience coexist, but only long enough to startle us. Living on the periphery as she lived, she no doubt appreciated the tangential moment and the absurd clarity of paradox. Some things are best observed when attention is turned away. Insight is perhaps always as close as the gesture of some anonymous neighbor opening a window.

Notes

¹ R. P. Blackmur, Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), pp. 34-35.

² Porter, The Art, p. 125.

³ Porter, The Modern Idiom, p.39.

⁴ Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 143-44.

⁵ E. Miller Budick, Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language: A Study in Symbolic Poetics (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 21.

⁶ Stephen E. Whicher, ed., Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 35.

- 7 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 39.
- 8 Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 94.
- 9 Budick, p. 20.
- 10 "To Mrs. J. G. Holland," late 1883, Letter 873.
- 11 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 112.
- 12 Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951), p. 226.
- 13 Griffith, p. 67.
- 14 Griffith, p. 112.
- 15 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 188.
- 16 Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 188.
- 17 Griffith, pp. 125-26.
- 18 Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson, ed. The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).
- 19 Blackmur, p. 42.
- 20 Blackmur, p. 42.
- 21 Griffith, p. 54.
- 22 Greg Johnson, Emily Dickinson: Perception and the Poet's Quest (University of Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 161.
- 23 Johnson, p. 161.

ARTICULATION AND THE PANIC EPISODE:
THE UNREAL REALITY OF DICKINSON'S SUBJECTIVE TROPE

"I suppose there are depths in every consciousness from which we cannot rescue ourselves."¹

Throughout this work I have maintained that Dickinson's peculiar disposition toward the world reflects the pervasive influence of agoraphobia. Dickinson's letters tell us that she regarded her fear as unmitigatedly intransitive, its source indeterminable. The American Psychiatric Association now includes this opaqueness as a necessary distinction of the agoraphobic syndrome: "What distinguished most phobias from agoraphobia is that most phobias involve a particular circumscribed stimulus whereas agoraphobia, the most severe and pervasive form of phobic disorder,..." does not.² More and more frequently, experts refer to agoraphobia as the "fear of fear."³ Correctly speaking, agoraphobics fear neither open spaces, as was long thought, nor "foreign" (non-domesticated) environments as much as the fearful feeling or the panic that inexplicably occurs in these environments. "[S]ince panic attacks are almost always present [in agoraphobia], some doctors see agoraphobia as synonymous with acute and/or periodic panic attacks."⁴ Panic has become the hallmark of the agoraphobic experience. As one agoraphobic explains: "The impact of the panic must not be underestimated. [For the agoraphobic] it is the most salient feature of life."⁵ Characterized by feelings of unreality, this panic ironically becomes the most conspicuous "reality" of the agoraphobic's life. Despite the intensity

of the panic, the problematic sensation of depersonalization and derealization continuously frustrate the agoraphobic's attempt to speak about the experience.

For Dickinson, who is a poet as well as an agoraphobic, this pervasive though irrational fear naturally touches her language. In the preceding chapter I offer the possibility that the inaccessibility of her style actually responds to, rather than refutes, her struggle for self-articulation. The poet's difficult language demonstrates her desire to find, or to create, a trope capable of suggesting the depth and persistence of her phobia. Dickinson's poetry specifically reflects her preoccupation with the panic episode.

Death provides Dickinson a metaphor in her struggle for this difficult articulation. Often it is used to demonstrate the limitations of language, its failure to penetrate the profound but legitimate reality of her experience. Ironically, her dead and dying subjects often complain of the exaggerated sensations associated with their condition. The noisy "Funeral [feit] in [the] Brain" eventually renders "Being, but an Ear" (J. 280); we are shocked by the unambiguous physicality of the fly in "I heard a fly Buzz" (J. 465). Death himself often represents a kind of dispassionate materiality; his succinct and sufficient details circumscribe life in "Because I could not stop for Death" (J. 712).

Despite their hypersensitivity, and sometimes their sensuousness, Dickinson's gothic subjects cannot articulate their experience of death. Even the careful guardians who attend the dead and dying will complain about the remoteness of dead friends, relatives, and neighbors. Although convinced of the extraordinary vision of the dead, their "Compound Vision" (J. 906), the observers are frustrated by the "dying Eye"

that scans the room and shuts "without disclosing what it be / 'Twere blessed to have seen" (J. 547). Sometimes death will seem merely the means by which something else will be accomplished or perhaps the portent of something to come: the "Polar Expiation" or the "Omen in the Bone" (J. 532). Often it points toward but is not identical to the essence of an experience: it is the absolute qualifier or the pronoun given the nominal rank. "It" was neither death nor all the dead-like things: the "frost," the "Marble feet," the "Midnight," the existence "shaven" and "fitted to a frame." Nonetheless, "it tasted like them all" (J. 510). The paralysis and restraint about which Dickinson's sentient dead so often complain reinforce the sense of their entrapment within their experiences. Their reluctance to say with certainty anything at all about death distinguishes it from nearly all other experiences. Despite the remoteness and ambiguity of death, the Dickinson poem treats it as a real phenomenon. "Dying," Dickinson will insist, is simply "a different way-- / A kind behind the Door."

Certainly readers have paid the Gothicism of Dickinson's work greater attention than any other of her many literary preoccupations; death, of course, is the subject about which she most often writes. If we assume it provides her a trope capable of exploring her phobia, her morbidity seems less peculiar than practical. Dickinson may have found, however, metaphors of the mind, what I will call her metaphors of subjectivity, at least as accommodating as her metaphors of death. These metaphors will suggest that reality is determined by and dependent upon the mind, born of its several unconscious states. Often the poet uses both types, metaphors of death and the mind. She may simply allow both the Gothic and the subjective metaphors each to dominate sections of the same poem

("'Twas like a Maeistrom," J. 414). On the other hand, "I felt a Funeral in the Brain" (J. 280) uses an extended metaphor, mixed of funerals and insanity, to suggest the unidentified "knowing" that finally "breaks through."

Metaphors of the mind may have proven more useful than death in Dickinson's quest to talk about the essence of her phobia. Death may suggest the more or less routinely ambiguous anxiety of her daily existence. Her metaphors of the mind, particularly metaphors of madness, point to the spontaneously felt but equally obscure panic episodes which Dickinson no doubt felt controlled and shaped her life. The parts of the mind we call the unconscious and subconscious, Dickinson's "depths [of] Consciousness," provide a region where the unreality of her situation might be located and in some way controlled. She may have valued metaphor as a vehicle capable of reaching the "self behind Ourselves," the self which Dickinson probably felt demanded the peculiar and inexplicable need for self-exile.

Despite her understandable ignorance about her phobia, Dickinson often demonstrates a remarkable comprehension of the unconscious mind. In a number of poems, she implies that madness might be identified with the disintegration of personality; the split self and the cleft brain are images that frequently occur. After one such explosive experience, the narrator asks: "Could it be Madness--this?" (J. 410). Certainly Dickinson's milieu provides some basis for a concept of madness that might be represented by metaphors and images that suggest a disjunction or fragmentation within the mind. The condition of being "disordered in the brain" was a legal defense in Massachusetts as early as 1741.⁶ Even the suggestion that madness has something to do with estrangement

or alienation from the self was not an altogether new concept in the nineteenth century. "The older name of the psychiatrist--the alienist--points to one of the basic aspects of mental disorder, namely, that those designated mentally ill are somehow 'foreign', alien."⁷ In 1835 Luther Ball, superintendent of the progressive McLean Asylum in Massachusetts, described madness as "alienation of the mind."⁸ The common citizen of nineteenth-century America, no doubt Dickinson herself, might have described the insane as "not himself," "beside himself," or even "out of his mind."⁹ Even the term "distracted," a term frequently used to describe aberrant but non-violent behavior, "suggests a person whose mind is outside present reality" (emphasis added).¹⁰

Dickinson's metaphors of madness, however, focus sharply upon the essence of madness. They offer a strikingly modern profile or concept of madness. Indeed, her split-mind metaphor actually reminds us of the condition we might now identify as schizophrenia. Certainly at times Dickinson genuinely felt some concern about her own sanity. A letter to her Norcross cousins is typical of several that voice this fear: "Think Emily lost her wits--but she found 'em, likely. Don't part with wits long at a time in this neighborhood."¹¹ We should not dismiss the literalness of her question in a poem that describes the fragmentation of the "Soul": "Could it be Madness--this?"

Dickinson's subjective and Gothic metaphors, however, are probably more indicative of her peculiarly inaccessible and ambiguous phobia than of either madness or death. The "companion fears" of madness and death are often used by agoraphobics in general to approach and to articulate their experience.¹² Perhaps Dickinson bases her own specific analogies upon "that oblique belief we call conjecture" (J. 122); she may have

simply noticed that her phobia shared with both death and madness an intensity or extremeness that literally overwhelms. Like death and madness, agoraphobia is an "unknown Renown" (J. 1317) in her life. Death and madness are not simply circumstantial; they, like her phobia, are instead the circumstances to which all other circumstances must respond and adapt. Furthermore, her phobia shares with both extreme conditions an unyielding resistance to articulation. The agoraphobic, like Dickinson's dead and insane, experiences a kind of speechlessness. Death, Dickinson calls the "stubborn theme" (J. 1221). The exploded mind can manage only "mumblings" and inappropriate "giggling" (J. 410), and perhaps the split brain would discuss its own unreasonableness had not first its "Sequence unravelled out of Sound" (J. 937).

Even though they encounter resistance, Dickinson's confused and trapped narrators relentlessly attempt to speak about their experiences. Their questions often focus upon articulating and making sense of their problematic condition:

The first Day's Night had come--
And grateful that a thing
So terrible--had been endured--
I told my Soul to sing--

She said her Strings were snap--
Her Bow--to Atoms blown--
And so to mend her--gave me work
Until another Morn--

And then--A Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled it's horror in my face--
Until it blocked my eyes--

My Brain--began to laugh--
I mumbled--like a fool--
And tho' 'tis Years ago--that Day--
My Brain keeps giggling--still.

in this poem that would make sense of the "thing so terrible," the narrator concludes:

And Something's odd--within--
 That person that I was--
 And this One--do not feel the same--
 (J. 410)

In the first stanza of another of Dickinson's "mad" poems, the narrator makes a desperate effort to reconcile what seems to be depersonalization to reality. She strives to make the experience fit:

I felt my life with both my hands
 To see if it was there--
 I held my spirit to the Glass,
 To prove it possibler--
 (J. 351)

Sometimes the narrator seems unable or unwilling to reconcile the unreality of her experience. Intense self-reflection becomes self-detachment, and the split personality itself becomes the object for metaphor:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind--
 As if my Brain had split--
 I tried to match it--Seam by Seam--
 But could not make them fit.

 The thought behind, I strove to join
 Unto the thought before--
 But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls--upon a Floor.
 (J. 937)

This poem offers one of Dickinson's most chilling descriptions of detachment. We can almost imagine the brain removed from the body; it appears to be an object of discussion or curiosity, a handiwork lying in the lap of its casually insane and "mindless" body. Unlike the two

poems previously quoted (J. 351, 410), "I felt a Cleaving" makes only a perfunctory effort to reconcile the episode with reason. The mending is done without urgency and with a kind of acceptance. Both of the earlier poems treat the unreasonable episode as if it were reasonable; they attempt to speak about it as if language alone could make sense of such things. In "The first Day's Night," this assumption results in continued ambiguity and further questioning. The narrator offers only the possibility that such "oddity" might be madness. Her final question is addressed perhaps to no one, for no one can answer. In "I felt my life" (J. 351), the speaker's effort to identify her experience empirically results in a meaningless checklist which presumably isolates nothing unusual:

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there--
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler--

I turned my Being round and round
And paused at every pound
To ask the Owner's name--
For doubt, that I should know the Sound--

I judged my features--jarred my hair--
I pushed my dimples by, and waited--
If they--twinkled back--
Conviction might, of me--

Both "The first Day's Night" and "I felt my life" struggle to articulate the important episode (the "Day as huge / As Yesterdays in pairs") which defies reason and ultimately language. "I felt a Cleaving," however, will present the episode with what sounds like the actual voice of madness. Both the episode and the speaker impress us as unreasoning; in this poem nothing "fits." The sewing metaphor itself diminishes, or rejects altogether, the violence which seems intrinsic to the occasion. The quiet domesticity of the handiwork and the estrangement of the mind

not just torn or split but actually cleft strike us as incongruous. Even the tone of the narrator's voice seems grossly inappropriate. Her affectation, the lack of urgency or even concern, unnerves us. Her behavior is particularly disturbing in light of her own involvement in the horrific episode: the "mindless" body--the speaker's own body--calmly but unsuccessfully mends its own split brain. (We might well have welcomed some hysteria.) The chaos of the occasion, albeit restrained, may itself oppose the orderly structure of the poem. The predictable rhythms may even clash with the condition of the disorderly brain.

We cannot explain, and the narrator offers no explanation for, the apparently irreparably damaged mind: "Seam by Seam," the segments logically should fit. Indeed, the illogicality of the whole affair seems to be the focus of the poem. The episode which feels to the narrator like the cleaving of the brain has rendered logic useless. In the final stanza, the unreasonableness becomes more apparent as logic itself is rejected:

The thought behind, I strove to join
 Unto the thought before--
 But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls--upon a Floor.

This second and more difficult of the poem's images implies a problem with cognition: thought no longer seems capable of holding onto itself in a coherent way. Reason or logic, the "Sequence," "ravels." "Raveling," of course, suggests the cleft brain's unreasonable "Seams," perhaps its madness. The episode is imagined as a kind of fissure, a split both in time (the "then" and "now") and space (defined by the seams). The aligning of seams in the first stanza becomes the more abstract joining of thoughts in the second stanza. Both operations imply logic, and both admittedly fail. The irreparably and inexplicably damaged mind cannot regain its sense of coherence and consistency.

The final two lines offer the possibility that the episode's resistance to logic relates to a resistance to language: "But Sequence ravelled out of Sound / Like Balls--upon a floor." The sudden, even unexpected inclusion of "Sound" in the penultimate line may be of indeterminable relevance to the poem. Indeed, the activity of the poem has produced a deadly lack of sound: the sewing metaphor has muffled the violent occasion with which the poem began, and the mindless passivity of the narrator nearly denies her action altogether. The introduction of the possibility of sound seems related to the resolution of the split-brain dilemma. The second stanza identifies the failed logic (the unreasonable "seams" of the first stanza) as the failure of sequential thought. The difficult relationships between thoughts and sequence and between sequence and sound may suggest language. Sanity, or coherent thought, seems dependent upon a specific kind of sequence that is related to thoughts by some kind of sound. "Ravelling" of the mind is directly related to the failure of "sequence" to retain "sound." As one of Dickinson's most succinct comments about the limitations of language, "I felt a Cleaving" implies the profound effects of the inarticulate moment. The poem accomplishes a sense of incongruity that may well express for Dickinson the unsatisfactory relationship between certain experiences and articulation, perhaps between her phobia and her expression of it.

Nonetheless, the poem does satisfy us. We may find ourselves searching out its corners and peripheries for those associations which surely must be responsible for the unity of the poem's disjointed particulars. Some of the problem is easily resolved and articulated; the associations are more or less discoverable. The contrast, for instance, between chaotic occasion and orderly structure actually reinforces the sense of

instability. The controlled structure may even suggest the inappropriate pose of the narrator. The strength of the poem, however, relies less upon resolution than upon the acceptance of, or the acquiescence to, a kind of discord. From out of her insanity, our narrator finds the impossible metaphor of the "mindless" self considering its own disordered mind. Although puzzling, the paradox of the "mindless" cogitator does seem to capture the experience of depersonalization: the self observing itself in some essential way, finding in itself the "disturbing combination of both the strange and the familiar."¹³

The language strikes us as appropriate and genuine. The image seems inscribed with the unconscious and perhaps disarranged environment to which it belongs. It seems at times, however, to challenge its own validity. In a sense utterly contradictory, the image continuously negates itself. We think we have the "mindless" thinker in our own minds only to recall its vivid mindlessness and its imponderableness. We apparently accept a certain absurdity, a kind of dream-logic that embraces even the utterances of madness. Paradoxically, we cannot even say what we have learned about the episode. The metaphor of the split-brain does not strictly represent or carry the total experience. Rather we should say that the experience is something like being out of (or without) one's own mind (mindlessness). At the same time the metaphor proposes a mindlessness that is becoming aware of itself. The image seems complete in our thoughts, but unavailable to our words. When we speak about it, we must acknowledge its impossibility even though we suspect, we even know, its "logic."

Sometimes Dickinson altogether prevents her "schizophrenic" narrator from speaking eloquently from the "depths of consciousness":

Me from Myself--to banish--
 Had I Art--
 Impregnable my Fortress
 Unto All Heart--

But since Myself--assault Me--
 How have I peace
 Except by subjugating
 Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
 How this be
 Except by Abdication--
 Me--of Me?

(J. 642)

The speaker correctly locates her problem internally, the "Myself" that "assault Me." The problem, the nature of the assault, is never identified. As she proceeds to peak, however, the linguistic implications of her rigid subjectivity become apparent. Listening to her, we might decide to identify her problem specifically as the language which proves incapable of representing her dilemma. She is troubled in some profound and essential way; we have really no reason to doubt the seriousness of her situation. Dickinson's blatantly self-conscious narrator struggles with the strangely personal metaphors. She offers us "images" for the absoluteness of her subjectivity (the "monarch," the "fortress"). Long before the final stanza with its final perplexing question, however, we sense that the narrator has exhausted the possibilities of her very personal personal pronouns. Dickinson, I believe, intentionally allows the poem to drift into a kind of nonsense. The apparently serious situation is burlesqued by the foolish speaker whose admitted hypersubjectivity prevents her attempt to speak about her situation.

More often than not, Dickinson's "schizophrenic" narrators speak in a language not of self-mockery but of violent self-fragmentation. Her death metaphors, as we have seen, usually imply diminution (the life

"shaven" and "fitted to a frame"), fading (the "White Exploit"), or simply decay ("Dilapidation's processes"). While the Gothicism emphasizes control, restrictiveness to the point of death or disappearance, the metaphoric uses of the mind (and particularly madness) suggest expansiveness. Rarely do Dickinson's poems accomplish a sense of detachment, depersonalization, or madness without the accompaniment of sudden violence: the self is damaged or blown apart, it erupts, or it is cleft. In the first stanza of "The first Day's Night," an unidentified experience has changed the speaker in some profound and basic way: "And Something's odd--within--." The "soul" has snapped, its "bow" blown to "atoms."

I cannot with certainty account for the violence which so often accompanies Dickinson's metaphors of subjectivity. We do not identify violence, either overt or suppressed, as a significant component of the agoraphobic experience; anger in the agoraphobic profile is neither extraordinary nor characteristic.¹⁴ Probably Dickinson simply associates the "out of the blue" phenomenon, the sudden and seemingly spontaneous experience of her panic, with a sort of explosiveness. The unreasoning experience may have suggested to her the metaphor of broken or "exploded" boundaries, a coming apart at the "seams." Violence may simply imply the range or the intensity of this experience which agoraphobics, almost without exception, describe as overwhelming. In some sense, the feeling of being caught up in or a part of an explosion serves to locate the agoraphobic in relationship to the panic. Correctly speaking, the panic should be regarded more as an implosion than an explosion; the collapse in "Reason" is often inward, toward the subject of the poem. Despite the chaos, the position of the speakers in her poems remains central, clearly in the middle of whatever vortex, maelstrom, or chaos Dickinson chooses to thrust them.

Although metaphors of death and the violent subconscious probably both respond and are indebted to Dickinson's agoraphobic experience, only the latter specifically addresses the panic episode. Death probably suggests for Dickinson the daily existence which is shaped by the irrational fear of panic. In a sense, Dickinson's Gothicism responds to the irrefutable evidence of her life, the obvious and superficial (i.e., occurring at the surface) manifestations of the phobia: the anxiety, the avoidance, all the eccentricities that she herself observed but could not explain. This surface, however, is profoundly affected by the demon, goblin, or the ghost whose presence always reels "one corridor away." Dickinson complains of the "tremendous nearness" of death (J. 532). Her anticipation of a "Death [that] is like the insect / Menacing the tree" (J. 1716) may convince us that we should turn our attention inward, inside the self. The daily and complete accommodation to her problematic "phantom," the exile and withdrawal, no doubt seems to Dickinson a kind of continuous death. Although her Gothicism often seems elliptic and evasive, it responds, more or less in an objective way, to her own observations of her life. Generally without commentary or explanation, her Gothicism points to this presence or influence that has shaped the part of her life obvious to both herself and others. Metaphorically "death" describes the restricted and uncomfortable, but fundamentally "safe," "Escape from Circumstance" (J. 382).

Dickinson's metaphors of the mind, and especially her metaphors of madness, may actually imagine a confrontation with the panic, the meticulously avoided "circumstance" that has shaped her life. We know that panic and madness are intimately connected in the agoraphobic's mind. We know, too, of a relationship between panic and the agoraphobic's

obsessive dread of broken or uncertain boundaries. The "agoraphobic's fears are worse and the panic is more likely when there [is] no boundary to [the] visual field; [furthermore], the panic diminishes when a boundary [is] imposed."¹⁵ Boundlessness represents a feeling of perpetual chaos for the agoraphobic. The panic is often "fed by a terrible fear of never coming out of that state, a chaotic panic-madness beyond description in its horror."¹⁶

Panic, however, is not without its attraction. Although it feels like absolute chaos, it also implies a kind of absolute freedom. The "Plank in Reason" breaks, but a world is discovered at every plunge. Indeed, agoraphobics often emphasize the strange exhilaration associated with their panic. Often they will make analogies between their panic and feelings of "giddiness" and "intoxication."¹⁷ They will compare the panic to "riding atop a tidal wave" or on the crest of a storm.¹⁸ The most important of its attractions, however, may be that it allows the agoraphobic to "depersonalize" when "anxiety reaches a level felt to be no longer tolerable." This most dreaded of all agoraphobic experiences ironically provides "release for its victim" from daily anxiety.¹⁹ The panic, therefore, is often regarded with ambivalence: the agoraphobic harbors both the dread of the episode and the suspicion that anything faced, no matter how horrific, is somehow better than its anticipation. One sufferer calls the panic experience "a haven" and compared the depersonalization to the "out-of-body sensation of people who [have] experienced clinical death before returning to live in their 'corpses' once more."²⁰

Many of Dickinson's poems demonstrate this ambivalence. In "The first Day's Night had come--," the speaker is so "grateful that a thing /

So terrible--[has] been endured--" that she instructs her "soul to sing--." The final stanza of Dickinson's famous "After great pain" (J. 341) demonstrates not exhilaration as much as resignation to the climactic horror:

This is the Hour of Lead--
Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons, recollect the Snow--
First--Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go--

As extraordinary as it might seem, the disruptive episode often appears to advance a kind of necessary restoration or reanimation. In a sense, fragmentation and dissociation are desirable in many of Dickinson's poems. Often the poet assumes an attitude of affirmation, and the poem actually seems to recommend rather than avoid the episode. In a few extreme cases, the poems even imply that dissociation is a corrected condition:

If ever the lid gets off my head
And lets the brain away
The fellow will go where he belonged--
Without a hint from me,

And the world--if the world be looking on--
Will see how far from home
It is possible for sense to live
The soul there--all the time.

(J. 1727)

We might almost overlook the detachment, the self-fragmentation, and the "mindlessness" the poem proposes; the tone is light, the conclusion optimistic. The outburst which the speaker imagines is muted by the amiable language and the visionary implications of the theme. Nonetheless, the brain, apparently under pressure, is propelled forth or drawn out from the top of the head. Rather than attempt to make sense of the pathology of the "mad" narrator, Dickinson elevates madness it-

self, associates it with self-fulfillment, even transcendence. The episode will permit the rightful expansion of the soul which will seem perfectly obvious to all.

I do not make the claim that Dickinson equates insanity or depersonalization, or any of their several sensations, with enlightenment. Insanity simply provides her a metaphor for the discussion of panic, which includes the bizarre attractiveness of depersonalization. Madness provides a presence, however absurd or uncommunicative or terrible, that permits the depersonalization to be approached and even talked about in at least some small way.

Dickinson's "schizophrenic" voice often implies its own metaphoric use. The dissociated self sees itself as if it had been cleft. It talks about its own injury and observes its own fragmentation. Unlike depersonalization, however, derealization (the second and more frequently experienced effect of the panic episode) resists metaphorization altogether. Derealization describes the condition that assaults and rejects all concrete claims to reality. It has been described "by one phobic as being 'outside of things'.... Nothing the victim touches or hears or sees feels real."²¹ The derealization experience calls reality itself into question; one agoraphobic calls this sensation of the environment "really unreal."²² The feeling might better be captured by the phrase "unreal reality": what is perceived and accepted as real by the sufferer is this sense of all things being vaguely unreal. Dickinson's attempt to explore this most difficult and puzzling of experiences makes some of her finest and most original uses of language possible. This is language often unencumbered by the good sense and etiquette of reality.

Sometimes Dickinson implies that the problem of articulating the experience of derealization involves locating or stabilizing the "unreal reality." We know that "derealization involves this feeling of spatial disorientation, [the] feeling that surroundings are strange, unreal and detached. Distance perceptions may be altered or the ground may seem to move or be unsteady underfoot."²³ A number of Dickinson's poems seem to imagine an unreasonable and uncertain environment, an environment distinguished by its instability:

I saw no Way--the Heavens were stitched--
 I felt the Columns close--
 The Earth reversed her Hemispheres--
 I touched the Universe--

And back it slid--and I alone--
 A Speck upon a Ball--
 Went out upon Circumference--
 Beyond the Dip of Bell--

(J. 378)

"I saw no Way" may offer a specific "example of micropsia, a frightening aspect of derealization in which the surroundings appear to be small and distant."²⁴ Her poems also suggest the reciprocal sensation of macropsia, another facet of the derealization experience, "[during] which the individual perceives his/her surroundings as enlarged and near."²⁵

I stepped from Plank to Plank
 A slow and cautious way
 The Stars about my Head I felt
 Above my Feet the Sea.

(J. 875)

"Here [in "I saw no Way"] the speaker becomes enormous, tall, the universe, equivalent to the universe."²⁶

Often Dickinson associates this precarious environment with an overwhelming and supernatural (or mystic) cosmos:

Behind Me--dips Eternity--
 Before Me--immortality--
 Myself--The Term between--
 Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
 Dissolving into Dawn away,
 Before the West begins--

'Tis Kingdoms--afterwards--They say--
 In perfect--pauseless Monarchy--
 Whose Prince--is Son of None--
 Himself--His Dateless Dynasty--
 Himself--Himself diversify--
 In Duplicate divine--

'Tis Miracle before Me--then--
 'Tis Miracle behind--between--
 A Crescent in the Sea--
 With Midnight to the North of Her--
 And Midnight to the South of Her--
 And Maeistrom--in the Sky--

(J. 721)

Representative of a number of Dickinson's poems, "Behind me--dips Eternity--" describes a kind of aesthetics of relativity that would perhaps locate the essence of the cosmic "Miracle" within the self. The second stanza seems to question orthodox (Christian) interpretations of the universe; the speaker appears somewhat reluctant to accept what "They say." (We often discover in Dickinson a skepticism toward a God's-eye view of anything.)

More interesting than the middle stanza's suggestion of Dickinson's skepticism are the confused images of the speaker herself within the difficult and pandemonius scheme. Between "Eternity" ("Behind Me") and "Immortality" ("Before Me") rests the "Term," the specific time or duration of one's life. The central location of the self (the "Term") provides a perspective of the cosmos from which one might be easily overwhelmed. The "Term" seems also a focus or a fulcrum. If not the center of the universe, the self is then the center of gravity, the point about which all other points swirl. This radical self-centeredness

may suggest the extreme subjectivity of the experience. The speaker's point of view seems the only point of view; "reality," however chaotic or cosmic, independent of her subjectivity does not exist.

In the final stanza, the self or "Tern" of the first stanza is replaced by the "Crescent." One of Dickinson's favorite shapes, the crescent seems at times almost symbolic for the poet. Defined by the convex and concave edge, it implies both waxing and waning, both protraction and retraction, even perhaps restriction and release. The crescent also shows an interruption in spatial, observable wholeness. It is the "dip of Eternity," perhaps the incomplete phases of the moon seen rising out of (or setting into) the "Sea." Between what is certain ("Behind Me") and what will certainly come ("Before Me") rests the crescent, Dickinson's emblematic self.

Clearly the perspective and position of the narrator, her extreme subjectivity, influence the "reality" of the universe. The image and location of the narrator herself within the scheme is difficult; it resists even the imagination. One might question the geometry of the scheme itself; it seems to accommodate neither a two- nor three-dimensional representation. Certainly the completeness of the universe, or its obvious interruption, implies circularity as well as sphericity. Time and timelessness also influence the perception. Images of moons and globes and clocks ("midnights") and directions ("North" and "South") all converge and sometimes lose their distinctiveness in this "maelstrom." The poem juxtaposes and confuses time and space; days and nights seem comparable to north and south. We might imagine the speaker standing on the globe of the world, stretched into the stars. In another poem Dickinson calls a similarly positioned character the "Speck upon a

Ball" (J. 378). In some ways, Dickinson's poems with their skeptical sense of reality place her alongside those early clock-makers who hoped to capture not the hours of the days but rather to recreate the motions of the heavens. Capturing these motions, reconciling oneself to the "maelstrom," demands treatment of all information with some doubt and fear, as if all information were in some fundamental way imperfect and ambiguous.

An important final aspect of derealization which I have only indirectly covered concerns this very ambiguous problem of time. We know that the "unreal reality" includes "profound disturbances in the sense of [the] passage of time."²⁷ The perception of time, as well as the perception of space and objects, is shaped by the unreality of the agoraphobic's panic. Agoraphobics will often describe the episode as a kind of temporal disjunction or disunion; they will describe the panic as outside of or even without the dimension of time. Unfortunately, these distortions are among the most "complex and most difficult of all the [agoraphobic's] complaints."²⁸

We frequently detect in Dickinson's poems an apprehensiveness or anxiety connected with time. She often seems overwhelmed by the immensity of time. In order to speak about this feeling, she ascribes to time dimensions of space. She may even imagine it as a kind of enclosure that surrounds her life:

Time feels so vast that were it not
For an Eternity--
I fear me this Circumference
Engross my Finitude--

(J. 802)

In order to give it a sense of realness, Dickinson will often animate time. Its passing, the "Racing" seconds, she calls the "Hoofs of the

Clock" (J. 1473). She will describe time's presence as inimical or at least clearly annoying: "The Pendulum begins to count-- / Like little Schoiars--loud--" (J. 635).

Her poems suggest, too, a relativity which we often associate with the immediacy of our circumstances:

Two Lengths have every Day--
Its absolute extent
And Area Superior
By Hope or Horror lent--

Eternity will be
Velocity or Pause
At Fundamental Signals
From fundamental Laws

(J. 1295)

"A Clock Stopped--," a poem that describes the tenuous relationship between death and time, implies the extreme subjectivity of time:

A Clock stopped--
Not the Mantel's
Geneva's farthest skill
Cant put the puppet bowing--
That just dangled still--

An awe came on the Trinket!
The Figures hunched, with pain--
Then quivered out of Decimal--
Into Degreeless Noon--

It will not stir for Doctor's--
The Pendulum of snow--
The Shopman importunes it--
While cool--concernless No--

Nods from the Gilded pointers--
Nods form the Seconds slim--
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial life--
And Him--

(J. 287)

The poem begins with the problematic moment of death, a moment into which Dickinson frequently stares. The text responds to the com-

mom assumption that death can be made intelligible if it can be fitted within our boundaries of time; the absoluteness and reality of these boundaries, Dickinson questions. She recognizes that we often define life and distinguish it from non-existence by locating its terminal borders. We have heard her call the self the "term" which interrupts "eternity." Even though life, and death, may seem most real to us because of this duration, Dickinson remains skeptical. She challenges the validity of our assumptions about time, tests the integrity of the boundaries as well as the symbols and metaphors that would represent them.

With its insistent claims upon time, the clock would seem to offer the appropriate symbol for life, and the clock's failure the appropriate metaphor for the cessation of life. The "Clock [that] has stopped," that no longer ticks, is like the heart that no longer beats. The poem, however, may provide us with more insight into Dickinson's apprehensiveness about time than this somewhat unsophisticated reading would suggest. The poet's intended metaphor may be the most obvious and the most easily overlooked of all possible metaphors. Dickinson uses the clock simply as a metaphor for time, specifically for absolute time. As we shall see, the image of time in the poem suggests its intrinsic unreality and ambiguity. She will show us time without boundaries, without coherence, with no description or definition that can be made independent of the subjective experience it would fallaciously record and make sense of. The poem eventually questions whether symbols and metaphors of any kind (whether on clocks or in language) can accomplish anything more than the barest utterance of reality. Dickinson's clock metaphor demonstrates limitations in both our concepts of time (what time is and is not) and of language (what language can and cannot do).

As the poem moves from the first deadly moment of silence ("A Clock stopped--"), our expectations for the metaphor are challenged. Rather than define life (or death), the clock actually seems to depend upon the circumstances of life and death for its own identity and images, and for its own reality. The clock imagery presumably will be used to describe the deceased individual; the "clock" that has stopped is "not the Mantel's." However, the relationship between the apparently worthless "Trinket" and the deceased subject grows more problematic and confusing as the poem continues. Indeed, we cannot be sure whether the clock imagery describes the subject's condition or whether the subject's condition (his death) implies something about the symbolic clock's existence. The anthropomorphizing of the clock imagery itself compounds this confusion. No doubt the "puppet bowing" refers to the figurine that emerges hourly from the clock's heart. While not human, the "puppet" does assume a submissively human pose. The clock also wears a human expression: the look of "awe." Its pointers can respond with "nods." It even manages a rudimentary language: the "nod" means death, or "concernless No." Dickinson gives life to the clock, her symbol for absolute time, by allowing it human characteristics. The Clock's surprised look is not perhaps the reflection or representation of the subject's face, as we might at first imagine. I believe the "awe" suggests the clock's recognition of its own tenuous identity; it apparently has no real dimension separate from the subjective (the subject's) sense of it.

The poem, therefore, proposes that time is unreal, or at least not absolutely real. It also proposes a kind of unreality which is softened only by our own assumptions and perceptions of order and reality. The final six lines seem to imply that the unreality of the

situation is intrinsically related to the problem of finding symbols and language for reality. The perhaps arbitrary imposition of order upon chaos is suggested by the poet's animation of words and symbols themselves. We discover in the poem a confusion of symbols with the things for which words and symbols stand. The clock that presumably stands for the deceased individual or the absolute duration of his life becomes the individual himself. Not only does the clock announce the deceased's death, its "puppet" actually experiences a kind of death. Its awareness, its ability to reflect upon its situation (suggested in the look of "awe"), and its ability to feel pain demonstrate its "humanness."

In the same way that Dickinson ascribes human characteristics to the clock, she also animates or anthropomorphizes the words themselves. "Concernless No" gestures from the face of the clock: "Nods from the Gilded pointers-- / Nods from the Seconds slim--." "No" represents, of course, arrogant and stubborn Death. This time, however, in a Dickinson poem Death appears to be so perfectly a negation of everything as to require only the word "No," or even the minimal gesture of the nod itself. The horror the poem reveals is not primarily in the reduction of a human being to the seconds of the life, seconds which are themselves without meaning or intrinsic reality. The true horror is the symbol or gesture which can accommodate the deceased with so little effort. The language works in near silence, without elaboration, without explanation.

Dickinson may be proposing that this barest kind of articulation is all that can be offered, or imposed upon, many experiences without distorting them. The irony of the poem is that the bare utterance or gesture, the simple, symbolic negation, is deadly sufficient. The symbols on the face of the clock may point toward their own oblivion, their own "degree-

less Noon," but the "nod" from the word "No" seems to imply even less than oblivion. Without the somewhat arbitrary decisions about time and space, the deceased is simply like the word which now denies him the certainty of these dimensions. Without slipping into chaos itself, the language is as exact and as faithful to the abyss or death as it can get.

Dickinson recognized the dimension of uncertainty which shaped her life and determined the strange and often grotesque course of her language. It discredits Dickinson not at all to assert that she did not clearly understand her life. Although she obsessively explored her phobia in her poetry and no doubt wished for a metaphor or image that might articulate the extremely subjective "reality" of her panic, Dickinson, I believe, understood the difficulty such a search involved. The poetry reflects this difficulty, this frustration. As David Porter has suggested: "The poems are troubled by knowledge for which there is no adequate structure to perceive it."²⁹ She demanded of her language, therefore, that it should at least remain faithful, in some way, to the chaos of her condition. Familiarity and intimacy with the chaos does not in Dickinson's poems demand that we should understand chaos. Her poems demonstrate intuition, feeling, even instinct but rarely reason. The subjective experience of "ourself behind Ourselves" remains in her poetry intimately close and yet infinitely difficult to get at.

Notes

¹ "To Mrs. J. G. Holland," June 1878, Letter 555.

² Maryanne M. Garbowsky, The House without the Door (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 1989, p. 32.

³ Dianne L. Chambless and Alan J. Goldstein, Agoraphobia: Multiple Perspectives on Theory and Treatment (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1982), p. 2.

⁴ "To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson)," 15 January 1854, Letter 154.

⁵ Garbowsky, p. 34.

⁶ Clarke, p.37.

⁷ George Rosen, Madness and Society (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. ix.

⁸ Rosen, p. 33.

⁹ Mary Ann Jimenez, Changing Faces of Madness (Honover: Brandeis University Press, 1987). p. 22.

¹⁰ Jimenez, p. 22.

¹¹ "To Louise and Frances Norcross," 1861(?), Letter 234.

¹² Clarke, p. 53.

¹³ Garbowsky, p. 98.

¹⁴ Chambless, p. 184.

¹⁵ Thorpe, p. 3.

¹⁶ Clarke, p. 38.

¹⁷ Clarke, p. 12.

¹⁸ Clarke, p. 14.

¹⁹ Garbowsky, p. 98.

²⁰ Garbowsky, p. 98.

²¹ Garbowsky, p. 94.

²² Thorpe, p. 15.

²³ David V. Sheehan and Kathy Sheehan, "The Classification of Phobic Disorders" in The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine, 12 (1983), p. 254.

²⁴ Garbowsky, p. 120.

²⁵ Garbowsky, p. 121.

²⁶ D. H. Myers and G. Grant, "A Study of Depersonalization in Students" in British Journal of Psychiatry, 121 (1972), p. 62.

²⁷ N. Roth, "The Phobic Anxiety Depersonalization Syndrome" in Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, (1959), p. 589.

²⁸ Thorpe, p. 28.

²⁹ Porter, The Modern Idiom, p. 293.

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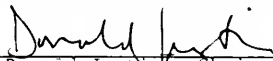
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

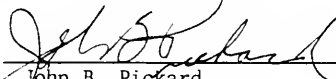
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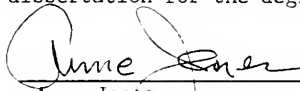
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